3 BOOKS IN 1

THE COMPLETE KANE CHRONICLES

FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* #1 BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

RICK RIORDAN

THE COMPLETE KANE CHRONICLES

BOOK 1
THE RED PYRAMID

BOOK 2
THE THRONE OF FIRE

BOOK 3
THE SERPENT'S SHADOW

RICK RIORDAN

DISNEY • HYPERION BOOKS
NEW YORK

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The Demigod Diaries

THE RED PYRAMID

RICK RIORDAN

Disney • Hyperion Books
New York

To all my librarian friends, champions of books, true magicians in the House of Life. Without you, this writer would be lost in the Duat.

WARNING

The following is a transcript of a digital recording. In certain places, the audio quality was poor, so some words and phrases represent the author's best guesses. Where possible, illustrations of important symbols mentioned in the recording have been added. Background noises such as scuffling, hitting, and cursing by the two speakers have not been transcribed. The author makes no claims for the authenticity of the recording. It seems impossible that the two young narrators are telling the truth, but you, the reader, must decide for yourself.

CARTER

1. A Death at the Needle

WE ONLY HAVE A FEW HOURS, so listen carefully.

If you're hearing this story, you're already in danger. Sadie and I might be your only chance.

Go to the school. Find the locker. I won't tell you which school or which locker, because if you're the right person, you'll find it. The combination is 13/32/33. By the time you finish listening, you'll know what those numbers mean. Just remember the story we're about to tell you isn't complete yet. How it ends will depend on you.

The most important thing: when you open the package and find what's inside, *don't* keep it longer than a week. Sure, it'll be tempting. I mean, it will grant you almost unlimited power. But if you possess it too long, it will consume you. Learn its secrets quickly and pass it on. Hide it for the next person, the way Sadie and I did for you. Then be prepared for your life to get very interesting.

Okay, Sadie is telling me to stop stalling and get on with the story. Fine. I guess it started in London, the night our dad blew up the British Museum.

My name is Carter Kane. I'm fourteen and my home is a suitcase.

You think I'm kidding? Since I was eight years old, my dad and I have traveled the world. I was born in L.A. but my dad's an archaeologist, so his work takes him all over. Mostly we go to Egypt, since that's his specialty. Go into a bookstore, find a book about Egypt, there's a pretty good chance it was written by Dr. Julius Kane. You want to know how Egyptians pulled the brains out of mummies, or built the pyramids, or cursed King Tut's tomb? My dad is your man. Of course, there are other reasons my dad moved around so much, but I didn't know his secret back then.

I didn't go to school. My dad homeschooled me, if you can call it "home" schooling when you don't have a home. He sort of taught me whatever he thought was important, so I learned a lot about Egypt and basketball stats and my dad's favorite musicians. I read a lot, too—pretty much anything I could get my hands on, from dad's history books to fantasy novels—because I spent a lot of time sitting around in hotels and airports and dig sites in foreign countries where I didn't know anybody. My dad was always telling me to put the book down and play some ball. You ever try to start a game of pick-up basketball in Aswan, Egypt? It's not easy.

Anyway, my dad trained me early to keep all my possessions in a single suitcase that fits in an airplane's overhead compartment. My dad packed the same way, except he was allowed an extra workbag for his archaeology tools. Rule number one: I was not allowed to look in his workbag. That's a rule I never broke until the day of the explosion.

It happened on Christmas Eve. We were in London for visitation day with my sister, Sadie.

See, Dad's only allowed two days a year with her—one in the winter, one in the summer—because our grandparents hate him. After our mom died, her parents (our grandparents) had this big court battle with Dad. After six lawyers, two fistfights, and a near fatal attack with a spatula (don't ask), they won the right to keep Sadie with them in England. She was only six, two years younger than me, and they couldn't keep us both—at least that was their excuse for not taking me. So Sadie was raised as a British schoolkid, and I traveled around with my dad. We only saw Sadie twice a year, which was fine with me.

[Shut up, Sadie. Yes—I'm getting to that part.]

So anyway, my dad and I had just flown into Heathrow after a couple of delays. It was a drizzly, cold afternoon. The whole taxi ride into the city, my dad seemed kind of nervous.

Now, my dad is a big guy. You wouldn't think anything could make him nervous. He has dark brown skin like mine, piercing brown eyes, a bald head, and a goatee, so he looks like a buff evil scientist. That afternoon he wore his cashmere winter coat and his best brown suit, the one he used for public lectures. Usually he exudes so much confidence that he dominates any room he walks into, but sometimes—like that afternoon—I saw another side to him that I didn't really understand. He kept looking over his shoulder like we were being hunted.

"Dad?" I said as we were getting off the A-40. "What's wrong?"

"No sign of them," he muttered. Then he must've realized he'd spoken aloud, because he looked at me kind of startled. "Nothing, Carter. Everything's fine."

Which bothered me because my dad's a terrible liar. I always knew when he was hiding something, but I also knew no amount of pestering would get the truth out of him. He was probably trying to protect me, though from what I didn't know. Sometimes I wondered if he had some dark secret in his past, some old enemy following him, maybe; but the idea seemed ridiculous. Dad was just an archaeologist.

The other thing that troubled me: Dad was clutching his workbag. Usually when he does that, it means we're in danger. Like the time gunmen stormed our hotel in Cairo. I heard shots coming from the lobby and ran downstairs to check on my dad. By the time I got there, he was just calmly zipping up his workbag while three unconscious gunmen hung by their feet from the chandelier, their robes falling over their heads so you could see their boxer shorts. Dad claimed not to have witnessed anything, and in the end the police blamed a freak chandelier malfunction.

Another time, we got caught in a riot in Paris. My dad found the nearest parked car, pushed me into the backseat, and told me to stay down. I pressed myself against the floorboards and kept my eyes shut tight. I could hear Dad in the driver's seat, rummaging in his bag, mumbling something to himself while the mob yelled and destroyed things outside. A few minutes later he told me it was safe to get up. Every other car on the block had been overturned and set on fire. Our car had been freshly washed and polished, and several twenty-euro notes had been tucked under the windshield wipers.

Anyway, I'd come to respect the bag. It was our good luck charm. But when my dad kept it close, it meant we were going to need good luck.

We drove through the city center, heading east toward my grandparents' flat. We passed the golden gates of Buckingham Palace, the big stone column in Trafalgar Square. London is a pretty cool place, but after you've traveled for so long, all cities start to blend together. Other kids I meet sometimes say, "Wow, you're so lucky you get to travel so much." But it's not like we spend our time sightseeing or have a lot of money to travel in style. We've stayed in some pretty rough places, and

we hardly ever stay anywhere longer than a few days. Most of the time it feels like we're fugitives rather than tourists.

I mean, you wouldn't think my dad's work was dangerous. He does lectures on topics like "Can Egyptian Magic Really Kill You?" and "Favorite Punishments in the Egyptian Underworld" and other stuff most people wouldn't care about. But like I said, there's that other side to him. He's always very cautious, checking every hotel room before he lets me walk into it. He'll dart into a museum to see some artifacts, take a few notes, and rush out again like he's afraid to be caught on the security cameras.

One time when I was younger, we raced across the Charles de Gaulle airport to catch a last-minute flight, and Dad didn't relax until the plane was off the ground, I asked him point blank what he was running from, and he looked at me like I'd just pulled the pin out of a grenade. For a second I was scared he might actually tell me the truth. Then he said, "Carter, it's nothing." As if "nothing" were the most terrible thing in the world.

After that, I decided maybe it was better not to ask questions.

My grandparents, the Fausts, live in a housing development near Canary Wharf, right on the banks of the River Thames. The taxi let us off at the curb, and my dad asked the driver to wait.

We were halfway up the walk when Dad froze. He turned and looked behind us.

"What?" I asked.

Then I saw the man in the trench coat. He was across the street, leaning against a big dead tree. He was barrel shaped, with skin the color of roasted coffee. His coat and black pinstriped suit looked expensive. He had long braided hair and wore a black fedora pulled down low over his dark round glasses. He reminded me of a jazz musician, the kind my dad would always drag me to see in concert. Even though I couldn't see his eyes, I got the impression he was watching us. He might've been an old friend or colleague of Dad's. No matter where we went, Dad was always running into people he knew. But it did seem strange that the guy was waiting here, outside my grandparents'. And he didn't look happy.

"Carter," my dad said, "go on ahead."

"But—"

"Get your sister. I'll meet you back at the taxi."

He crossed the street toward the man in the trench coat, which left me with two choices: follow my dad and see what was going on, or do what I was told.

I decided on the slightly less dangerous path. I went to retrieve my sister.

Before I could even knock, Sadie opened the door.

"Late as usual," she said.

She was holding her cat, Muffin, who'd been a "going away" gift from Dad six years before. Muffin never seemed to get older or bigger. She had fuzzy yellow-and-black fur like a miniature leopard, alert yellow eyes, and pointy ears that were too tall for her head. A silver Egyptian pendant dangled from her collar. She didn't look anything like a muffin, but Sadie had been little when she named her, so I guess you have to cut her some slack.

Sadie hadn't changed much either since last summer.

[As I'm recording this, she's standing next to me, glaring, so I'd better be careful how I describe her.]

You would never guess she's my sister. First of all, she'd been living in England so long, she has a British accent. Second, she takes after our mom, who was white, so Sadie's skin is much lighter than mine. She has straight caramel-colored hair, not exactly blond but not brown, which she usually dyes with streaks of bright colors. That day it had red streaks down the left side. Her eyes are blue. I'm serious. *Blue* eyes, just like our mom's. She's only twelve, but she's exactly as tall as me, which is really annoying. She was chewing gum as usual, dressed for her day out with Dad in battered jeans, a leather jacket, and combat boots, like she was going to a concert and was hoping to stomp on some people. She had headphones dangling around her neck in case we bored her.

[Okay, she didn't hit me, so I guess I did an okay job of describing her.]

"Our plane was late," I told her.

She popped a bubble, rubbed Muffin's head, and tossed the cat inside. "Gran, going out!"

From somewhere in the house, Grandma Faust said something I couldn't make out, probably "Don't let them in!"

Sadie closed the door and regarded me as if I were a dead mouse her cat had just dragged in. "So, here you are again."

"Yep."

"Come on, then." She sighed. "Let's get on with it."

That's the way she was. No "Hi, how you been the last six months? So glad to see you!" or anything. But that was okay with me. When you only see each other twice a year, it's like you're distant cousins rather than siblings. We had absolutely nothing in common except our parents.

We trudged down the steps. I was thinking how she smelled like a combination of old people's house and bubble gum when she stopped so abruptly, I ran into her.

"Who's that?" she asked.

I'd almost forgotten about the dude in the trench coat. He and my dad were standing across the street next to the big tree, having what looked like a serious argument. Dad's back was turned so I couldn't see his face, but he gestured with his hands like he does when he's agitated. The other guy scowled and shook his head.

"Dunno," I said. "He was there when we pulled up."

"He looks familiar." Sadie frowned like she was trying to remember. "Come on."

"Dad wants us to wait in the cab," I said, even though I knew it was no use. Sadie was already on the move.

Instead of going straight across the street, she dashed up the sidewalk for half a block, ducking behind cars, then crossed to the opposite side and crouched under a low stone wall. She started sneaking toward our dad. I didn't have much choice but to follow her example, even though it made me feel kind of stupid.

"Six years in England," I muttered, "and she thinks she's James Bond."

Sadie swatted me without looking back and kept creeping forward.

A couple more steps and we were right behind the big dead tree. I could hear my dad on the other side, saying, "—have to, Amos. You know it's the right thing."

"No," said the other man, who must've been Amos. His voice was deep and even—very insistent. His accent was American. "If *I* don't stop you, Julius, *they* will. The Per Ankh is shadowing you."

Sadie turned to me and mouthed the words "Per *what*?"

I shook my head, just as mystified. "Let's get out of here," I whispered, because I figured we'd be spotted any minute and get in serious trouble. Sadie, of course, ignored me.

"They don't know my plan," my father was saying. "By the time they figure it out—"

"And the children?" Amos asked. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. "What about them?"

"I've made arrangements to protect them," my dad said. "Besides, if I don't do this, we're all in danger. Now, back off."

"I can't, Julius."

"Then it's a duel you want?" Dad's tone turned deadly serious. "You never could beat me, Amos."

I hadn't seen my dad get violent since the Great Spatula Incident, and I wasn't anxious to see a repeat of *that*, but the two men seemed to be edging toward a fight.

Before I could react, Sadie popped up and shouted, "Dad!"

He looked surprised when she tackle-hugged him, but not nearly as surprised as the other guy, Amos. He backed up so quickly, he tripped over his own trench coat.

He'd taken off his glasses. I couldn't help thinking that Sadie was right. He did look familiar—like a very distant memory.

"I—I must be going," he said. He straightened his fedora and lumbered down the road.

Our dad watched him go. He kept one arm protectively around Sadie and one hand inside the workbag slung over his shoulder. Finally, when Amos disappeared around the corner, Dad relaxed. He took his hand out of the bag and smiled at Sadie. "Hello, sweetheart."

Sadie pushed away from him and crossed her arms. "Oh, now it's *sweetheart,* is it? You're late. Visitation Day's nearly over! And what was that about? Who's Amos, and what's the Per Ankh?"

Dad stiffened. He glanced at me like he was wondering how much we'd overheard.

"It's nothing," he said, trying to sound upbeat. "I have a wonderful evening planned. Who'd like a private tour of the British Museum?"

Sadie slumped in the back of the taxi between Dad and me.

"I can't believe it," she grumbled. "One evening together, and you want to do research."

Dad tried for a smile. "Sweetheart, it'll be fun. The curator of the Egyptian collection personally invited—"

"Right, big surprise." Sadie blew a strand of red-streaked hair out of her face. "Christmas Eve, and we're going to see some moldy old relics from Egypt. Do you ever think about *anything* else?"

Dad didn't get mad. He never gets mad at Sadie. He just stared out the window at the darkening sky and the rain.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I do."

Whenever Dad got quiet like that and stared off into nowhere, I knew he was thinking about our mom. The last few months, it had been happening a lot. I'd walk into our hotel room and find him with his cell phone in his hands, Mom's picture smiling up at him from the screen—her hair tucked under a headscarf, her blue eyes startlingly bright against the desert backdrop.

Or we'd be at some dig site. I'd see Dad staring at the horizon, and I'd know he was remembering how he'd met her—two young scientists in the Valley of the Kings, on a dig to discover a lost tomb. Dad was an Egyptologist. Mom was an anthropologist looking for ancient DNA. He'd told me the story a thousand times.

Our taxi snaked its way along the banks of the Thames. Just past Waterloo Bridge, my dad tensed.

"Driver," he said. "Stop here a moment."

The cabbie pulled over on the Victoria Embankment.

"What is it, Dad?" I asked.

He got out of the cab like he hadn't heard me. When Sadie and I joined him on the sidewalk, he was staring up at Cleopatra's Needle.

In case you've never seen it: the Needle is an obelisk, not a needle, and it doesn't have anything to do with Cleopatra. I guess the British just thought the name sounded cool when they brought it to London. It's about seventy feet tall, which would've been really impressive back in Ancient Egypt, but on the Thames, with all the tall buildings around, it looks small and sad. You could drive right by it and not even realize you'd just passed something that was a thousand years older than the city of London.

"God." Sadie walked around in a frustrated circle. "Do we have to stop for *every* monument?"

My dad stared at the top of the obelisk. "I had to see it again," he murmured. "Where it happened…"

A freezing wind blew off the river. I wanted to get back in the cab, but my dad was really starting to worry me. I'd never seen him so distracted.

"What, Dad?" I asked. "What happened here?"

"The last place I saw her."

Sadie stopped pacing. She scowled at me uncertainly, then back at Dad. "Hang on. Do you mean Mum?"

Dad brushed Sadie's hair behind her ear, and she was so surprised, she didn't even push him away.

I felt like the rain had frozen me solid. Mom's death had always been a forbidden subject. I knew she'd died in an accident in London. I knew my grandparents blamed my dad. But no one would ever tell us the details. I'd given up asking my dad, partly because it made him so sad, partly because he absolutely refused to tell me anything. "When you're older" was all he would say, which was the most frustrating response ever.

"You're telling us she died here," I said. "At Cleopatra's Needle? What happened?"

He lowered his head.

"Dad!" Sadie protested. "I go past this *every* day, and you mean to say—all this time—and I didn't even *know*?"

"Do you still have your cat?" Dad asked her, which seemed like a really stupid question.

"Of course I've still got the cat!" she said. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"And your amulet?"

Sadie's hand went to her neck. When we were little, right before Sadie went to live with our grandparents, Dad had given us both Egyptian amulets. Mine was an Eye of Horus, which was a popular protection symbol in Ancient Egypt.

In fact my dad says the modern pharmacist's symbol is a simplified version of the Eye of Horus, because medicine is supposed to protect you.

Anyway, I always wore my amulet under my shirt, but I figured Sadie would've lost hers or thrown it away.

To my surprise, she nodded. "'Course I have it, Dad, but don't change the subject. Gran's always going on about how you caused Mum's death. That's not true, is it?"

We waited. For once, Sadie and I wanted exactly the same thing—the truth.

"The night your mother died," my father started, "here at the Needle—"

A sudden flash illuminated the embankment. I turned, half blind, and just for a moment I glimpsed two figures: a tall pale man with a forked beard and wearing cream-colored robes, and a coppery-skinned girl in dark blue robes and a headscarf—the kind of clothes I'd seen hundreds of times in Egypt. They were just standing there side by side, not twenty feet away, watching us. Then the light faded. The figures melted into a fuzzy afterimage. When my eyes readjusted to the darkness, they were gone.

"Um…" Sadie said nervously. "Did you just see that?"

"Get in the cab," my dad said, pushing us toward the curb. "We're out of time."

From that point on, Dad clammed up.

"This isn't the place to talk," he said, glancing behind us. He'd promised the cabbie an extra ten pounds if he got us to the museum in under five minutes, and the cabbie was doing his best.

"Dad," I tried, "those people at the river—"

"And the other bloke, Amos," Sadie said. "Are they Egyptian police or something?"

"Look, both of you," Dad said, "I'm going to need your help tonight. I know it's hard, but you have to be patient. I'll explain everything, I promise, after we get to the museum. I'm going to make everything right again."

"What do you mean?" Sadie insisted. "Make *what* right?"

Dad's expression was more than sad. It was almost guilty. With a chill, I thought about what Sadie had said: about our grandparents blaming him for Mom's death. That *couldn't* be what he was talking about, could it?

The cabbie swerved onto Great Russell Street and screeched to a halt in front of the museum's main gates.

"Just follow my lead," Dad told us. "When we meet the curator, act normal."

I was thinking that Sadie never acted *normal,* but I decided not to say anything.

We climbed out of the cab. I got our luggage while Dad paid the driver with a big wad of cash. Then he did something strange. He threw a handful of small objects into the backseat—they looked like stones, but it was too dark for me to be sure. "Keep driving," he told the cabbie. "Take us to Chelsea."

That made no sense since we were already out of the cab, but the driver sped off. I glanced at Dad, then back at the cab, and before it turned the corner and disappeared in the dark, I caught a weird glimpse of three passengers in the backseat: a man and two kids.

I blinked. There was no way the cab could've picked up another fare so fast. "Dad—"

"London cabs don't stay empty very long," he said matter-of-factly. "Come along, kids."

He marched off through the wrought iron gates. For a second, Sadie and I hesitated.

"Carter, *what* is going on?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"Well, stay out here in the cold if you want, but *I'm* not leaving without an explanation." She turned and marched after our dad.

Looking back on it, I should've run. I should've dragged Sadie out of there and gotten as far away as possible. Instead I followed her through the gates.

2. An Explosion for Christmas

I'D BEEN TO THE BRITISH MUSEM BEFORE. In fact I've been in more museums than I like to admit—it makes me sound like a total geek.

[That's Sadie in the background, yelling that I *am* a total geek. Thanks, Sis.]

Anyway, the museum was closed and completely dark, but the curator and two security guards were waiting for us on the front steps.

"Dr. Kane!" The curator was a greasy little dude in a cheap suit. I'd seen mummies with more hair and better teeth. He shook my dad's hand like he was meeting a rock star. "Your last paper on Imhotep—brilliant! I don't know how you translated those spells!"

"Im-ho-who?" Sadie muttered to me.

"Imhotep," I said. "High priest, architect. Some say he was a magician. Designed the first step pyramid. You know."

"Don't know," Sadie said. "Don't care. But thanks."

Dad expressed his gratitude to the curator for hosting us on a holiday. Then he put his hand on my shoulder. "Dr. Martin, I'd like you to meet Carter and Sadie."

"Ah! Your son, obviously, and—" The curator looked hesitantly at Sadie. "And this young lady?"

"My daughter," Dad said.

Dr. Martin's stare went temporarily blank. Doesn't matter how open-minded or polite people think they are, there's always that moment of confusion that flashes across their faces when they realize Sadie is part of our family. I hate it, but over the years I've come to expect it.

The curator regained his smile. "Yes, yes, of course. Right this way, Dr. Kane. We're very honored!"

The security guards locked the doors behind us. They took our luggage, then one of them reached for Dad's workbag.

"Ah, no," Dad said with a tight smile. "I'll keep this one."

The guards stayed in the foyer as we followed the curator into the Great Court. It was ominous at night. Dim light from the glass-domed ceiling cast crosshatched shadows across the walls like a giant spiderweb. Our footsteps clicked on the white marble floor.

"So," Dad said, "the stone."

"Yes!" the curator said. "Though I can't imagine what new information you could glean from it. It's been studied to death—our most famous artifact, of course."

"Of course," Dad said. "But you may be surprised."

"What's he on about now?" Sadie whispered to me.

I didn't answer. I had a sneaking suspicion what stone they were talking about, but I couldn't figure out why Dad would drag us out on Christmas Eve to see it.

I wondered what he'd been about to tell us at Cleopatra's Needle—something about our mother and the night she died. And why did he keep glancing around as if he expected those strange people we'd seen at the Needle to pop up again? We were locked in a museum surrounded by guards and high-tech security. Nobody could bother us in here—I hoped.

We turned left into the Egyptian wing. The walls were lined with massive statues of the pharaohs and gods, but my dad bypassed them all and went straight for the main attraction in the middle of the room.

"Beautiful," my father murmured. "And it's not a replica?"

"No, no," the curator promised. "We don't always keep the actual stone on display, but for you—this is quite real."

We were staring at a slab of dark gray rock about three feet tall and two feet wide. It sat on a pedestal, encased in a glass box. The flat surface of the stone was chiseled with three distinct bands of writing. The top part was Ancient Egyptian picture writing: hieroglyphics. The middle section…I had to rack my brain to remember what my dad called it: *Demotic,* a kind of writing from the period when the Greeks controlled Egypt and a lot of Greek words got mixed into Egyptian. The last lines were in Greek.

"The Rosetta Stone," I said.

"Isn't that a computer program?" Sadie asked.

I wanted to tell her how stupid she was, but the curator cut me off with a nervous laugh. "Young lady, the Rosetta Stone was the key to deciphering hieroglyphics! It was discovered by Napoleon's army in 1799 and—"

"Oh, right," Sadie said. "I remember now."

I knew she was just saying that to shut him up, but my dad wouldn't let it go.

"Sadie," he said, "until this stone was discovered, regular mortals…er, I mean, no one had been able to read hieroglyphics for centuries. The written language of Egypt had been completely forgotten. Then an Englishman named Thomas Young proved that the Rosetta Stone's three languages all conveyed the same message. A Frenchman named Champollion took up the work and cracked the code of hieroglyphics."

Sadie chewed her gum, unimpressed. "What's it say, then?"

Dad shrugged. "Nothing important. It's basically a thank-you letter from some priests to King Ptolemy V. When it was first carved, the stone was no big deal. But over the centuries…over the centuries it has become a powerful symbol. Perhaps the most important connection between Ancient Egypt and the modern world. I was a fool not to realize its potential sooner."

He'd lost me, and apparently the curator too.

"Dr. Kane?" he asked. "Are you quite all right?"

Dad breathed deeply. "My apologies, Dr. Martin. I was just…thinking aloud. If I could have the glass removed? And if you could bring me the papers I asked for from your archives."

Dr. Martin nodded. He pressed a code into a small remote control, and the front of the glass box

clicked open.

"It will take a few minutes to retrieve the notes," Dr. Martin said. "For anyone else, I would hesitate to grant unguarded access to the stone, as you've requested. I trust you'll be careful."

He glanced at us kids like we were troublemakers.

"We'll be careful," Dad promised.

As soon as Dr. Martin's steps receded, Dad turned to us with a frantic look in his eyes. "Children, this is very important. You have to stay out of this room."

He slipped his workbag off his shoulder and unzipped it just enough to pull out a bike chain and padlock. "Follow Dr. Martin. You'll find his office at the end of the Great Court on the left. There's only one entrance. Once he's inside, wrap this around the door handles and lock it tight. We need to delay him."

"You want us to lock him in?" Sadie asked, suddenly interested. "Brilliant!"

"Dad," I said, "what's going on?"

"We don't have time for explanations," he said. "This will be our only chance. They're coming."

"Who's coming?" Sadie asked.

He took Sadie by the shoulders. "Sweetheart, I love you. And I'm sorry…I'm sorry for many things, but there's no time now. If this works, I promise I'll make everything better for all of us. Carter, you're my brave man. You have to trust me. Remember, lock up Dr. Martin. Then stay out of this room!"

Chaining the curator's door was easy. But as soon as we'd finished, we looked back the way we'd come and saw blue light streaming from the Egyptian gallery, as if our dad had installed a giant glowing aquarium.

Sadie locked eyes with me. "Honestly, do you have *any* idea what he's up to?"

"None," I said. "But he's been acting strange lately. Thinking a lot about Mom. He keeps her picture…"

I didn't want to say more. Fortunately Sadie nodded like she understood.

"What's in his workbag?" she asked.

"I don't know. He told me never to look."

Sadie raised an eyebrow. "And you never did? God, that is so like you, Carter. You're hopeless."

I wanted to defend myself, but just then a tremor shook the floor.

Startled, Sadie grabbed my arm. "He told us to stay put. I suppose you're going to follow that order too?"

Actually, that order was sounding pretty good to me, but Sadie sprinted down the hall, and after a moment's hesitation, I ran after her.

When we reached the entrance of the Egyptian gallery, we stopped dead in our tracks. Our dad stood in front of the Rosetta Stone with his back to us. A blue circle glowed on the floor around him, as if someone had switched on hidden neon tubes in the floor.

My dad had thrown off his overcoat. His workbag lay open at his feet, revealing a wooden box about two feet long, painted with Egyptian images.

"What's he holding?" Sadie whispered to me. "Is that a boomerang?"

Sure enough, when Dad raised his hand, he was brandishing a curved white stick. It did look like a boomerang. But instead of throwing the stick, he touched it to the Rosetta Stone. Sadie caught her breath. Dad was *writing* on the stone. Wherever the boomerang made contact, glowing blue lines appeared on the granite. Hieroglyphs.

It made no sense. How could he write glowing words with a stick? But the image was bright and clear: ram's horns above a box and an X.

"Open," Sadie murmured. I stared at her, because it sounded like she had just translated the word, but that was impossible. I'd been hanging around Dad for years, and even I could read only a few hieroglyphs. They are seriously hard to learn.

Dad raised his arms. He chanted: *"Wo-seer, i-ei."* And two more hieroglyphic symbols burned blue against the surface of the Rosetta Stone.

As stunned as I was, I recognized the first symbol. It was the name of the Egyptian god of the dead.

"Wo-seer," I whispered. I'd never heard it pronounced that way, but I knew what it meant. "Osiris."

"Osiris, come," Sadie said, as if in a trance. Then her eyes widened. "No!" she shouted. "Dad, no!"

Our father turned in surprise. He started to say, "Children—" but it was too late. The ground rumbled. The blue light turned to searing white, and the Rosetta Stone exploded.

When I regained consciousness, the first thing I heard was laughter—horrible, gleeful laughter mixed with the blare of the museum's security alarms.

I felt like I'd just been run over by a tractor. I sat up, dazed, and spit a piece of Rosetta Stone out of my mouth. The gallery was in ruins. Waves of fire rippled in pools along the floor. Giant statues had toppled. Sarcophagi had been knocked off their pedestals. Pieces of the Rosetta Stone had exploded outward with such force that they'd embedded themselves in the columns, the walls, the other exhibits.

Sadie was passed out next to me, but she looked unharmed. I shook her shoulder, and she grunted. "Ugh."

In front of us, where the Rosetta Stone had been, stood a smoking, sheared-off pedestal. The floor was blackened in a starburst pattern, except for the glowing blue circle around our father.

He was facing our direction, but he didn't seem to be looking at us. A bloody cut ran across his scalp. He gripped the boomerang tightly.

I didn't understand what he was looking at. Then the horrible laughter echoed around the room again, and I realized it was coming from right in front of me.

Something stood between our father and us. At first, I could barely make it out—just a flicker of heat. But as I concentrated, it took on a vague form—the fiery outline of a man.

He was taller than Dad, and his laugh cut through me like a chainsaw.

"Well done," he said to my father. "Very well done, Julius."

"You were not summoned!" My father's voice trembled. He held up the boomerang, but the fiery man flicked one finger, and the stick flew from Dad's hand, shattering against the wall.

"I am never summoned, Julius," the man purred. "But when you open a door, you must be prepared for guests to walk through."

"Back to the Duat!" my father roared. "I have the power of the Great King!"

"Oh, scary," the fiery man said with amusement. "And even if you knew how to use that power, which you do not, he was never my match. I am the strongest. Now you will share his fate."

I couldn't make sense of anything, but I knew that I had to help my dad. I tried to pick up the nearest chunk of stone, but I was so terrified my fingers felt frozen and numb. My hands were useless.

Dad shot me a silent look of warning: *Get out*. I realized he was intentionally keeping the fiery man's back to us, hoping Sadie and I would escape unnoticed.

Sadie was still groggy. I managed to drag her behind a column, into the shadows. When she started to protest, I clamped my hand over her mouth. That woke her up. She saw what was happening and stopped fighting.

Alarms blared. Fire circled around the doorways of the gallery. The guards had to be on their way, but I wasn't sure if that was a good thing for us.

Dad crouched to the floor, keeping his eyes on his enemy, and opened his painted wooden box. He brought out a small rod like a ruler. He muttered something under his breath and the rod elongated into a wooden staff as tall as he was.

Sadie made a squeaking sound. I couldn't believe my eyes either, but things only got weirder.

Dad threw his staff at the fiery man's feet, and it changed into an enormous serpent—ten feet long and as big around as I was—with coppery scales and glowing red eyes. It lunged at the fiery man, who effortlessly grabbed the serpent by its neck. The man's hand burst into white-hot flames, and the snake burned to ashes.

"An old trick, Julius," the fiery man chided.

My dad glanced at us, silently urging us again to run. Part of me refused to believe any of this was real. Maybe I was unconscious, having a nightmare. Next to me, Sadie picked up a chunk of stone.

"How many?" my dad asked quickly, trying to keep the fiery man's attention. "How many did I release?"

"Why, all five," the man said, as if explaining something to a child. "You should know we're a package deal, Julius. Soon I'll release even more, and they'll be very grateful. I shall be named king again."

"The Demon Days," my father said. "They'll stop you before it's too late."

The fiery man laughed. "You think the House can stop me? Those old fools can't even stop

arguing among themselves. Now let the story be told anew. And this time you shall *never* rise!"

The fiery man waved his hand. The blue circle at Dad's feet went dark. Dad grabbed for his toolbox, but it skittered across the floor.

"Good-bye, Osiris," the fiery man said. With another flick of his hand, he conjured a glowing coffin around our dad. At first it was transparent, but as our father struggled and pounded on its sides, the coffin became more and more solid—a golden Egyptian sarcophagus inlaid with jewels. My dad caught my eyes one last time, and mouthed the word *Run!* before the coffin sank into the floor, as if the ground had turned to water.

"Dad!" I screamed.

Sadie threw her stone, but it sailed harmlessly through the fiery man's head.

He turned, and for one terrible moment, his face appeared in the flames. What I saw made no sense. It was as if someone had superimposed two different faces on top of each other—one almost human, with pale skin, cruel, angular features, and glowing red eyes, the other like an animal with dark fur and sharp fangs. Worse than a dog or a wolf or a lion—some animal I'd never seen before. Those red eyes stared at me, and I knew I was going to die.

Behind me, heavy footsteps echoed on the marble floor of the Great Court. Voices were barking orders. The security guards, maybe the police—but they'd never get here in time.

The fiery man lunged at us. A few inches from my face, something shoved him backward. The air sparked with electricity. The amulet around my neck grew uncomfortably hot.

The fiery man hissed, regarding me more carefully. "So…it's *you.*"

The building shook again. At the opposite end of the room, part of the wall exploded in a brilliant flash of light. Two people stepped through the gap—the man and the girl we'd seen at the Needle, their robes swirling around them. Both of them held staffs.

The fiery man snarled. He looked at me one last time and said, "Soon, boy."

Then the entire room erupted in flames. A blast of heat sucked all the air of out my lungs and I crumpled to the floor.

The last thing I remember, the man with the forked beard and the girl in blue were standing over me. I heard the security guards running and shouting, getting closer. The girl crouched over me and drew a long curved knife from her belt.

"We must act quickly," she told the man.

"Not yet," he said with some reluctance. His thick accent sounded French. "We must be sure before we destroy them."

I closed my eyes and drifted into unconsciousness.

S A D I E

3. Imprisoned with My Cat

[Give me the bloody mic.]

Hullo. Sadie here. My brother's a rubbish storyteller. Sorry about that. But now you've got me, so all is well.

Let's see. The explosion. Rosetta Stone in a billion pieces. Fiery evil bloke. Dad boxed in a coffin. Creepy Frenchman and Arab girl with the knife. Us passing out. Right.

So when I woke up, the police were rushing about as you might expect. They separated me from my brother. I didn't really mind that part. He's a pain anyway. But they locked me in the curator's office for *ages*. And yes, they used *our* bicycle chain to do it. Cretins.

I was shattered, of course. I'd just been knocked out by a fiery whatever-it-was. I'd watched my dad get packed in a sarcophagus and shot through the floor. I tried to tell the police about all that, but did they care? No.

Worst of all: I had a lingering chill, as if someone was pushing ice-cold needles into the back of my neck. It had started when I looked at those blue glowing words Dad had drawn on the Rosetta Stone and I *knew* what they meant. A family disease, perhaps? Can knowledge of boring Egyptian stuff be hereditary? With my luck.

Long after my gum had gone stale, a policewoman finally retrieved me from the curator's office. She asked me no questions. She just trundled me into a police car and took me home. Even then, I wasn't allowed to explain to Gran and Gramps. The policewoman just tossed me into my room and I waited. And waited.

I don't like waiting.

I paced the floor. My room was nothing posh, just an attic space with a window and a bed and a desk. There wasn't much to do. Muffin sniffed my legs and her tail puffed up like a bottlebrush. I suppose she doesn't fancy the smell of museums. She hissed and disappeared under the bed.

"Thanks a lot," I muttered.

I opened the door, but the policewoman was standing guard.

"The inspector will be with you in a moment," she told me. "Please stay inside."

I could see downstairs—just a glimpse of Gramps pacing the room, wringing his hands, while Carter and a police inspector talked on the sofa. I couldn't make out what they were saying.

"Could I just use the loo?" I asked the nice officer.

"No." She closed the door in my face. As if I might rig an explosion in the toilet. Honestly.

I dug out my iPod and scrolled through my playlist. Nothing struck me. I threw it on my bed in

disgust. When I'm too distracted for music, that is a very sad thing. I wondered why Carter got to talk to the police first. It wasn't fair.

I fiddled with the necklace Dad had given me. I'd never been sure what the symbol meant. Carter's was obviously an eye, but mine looked a bit like an angel, or perhaps a killer alien robot.

Why on earth had Dad asked if I still had it? *Of course* I still had it. It was the only gift he'd ever given me. Well, apart from Muffin, and with the cat's attitude, I'm not sure I would call her a proper gift.

Dad had practically abandoned me at age six, after all. The necklace was my one link to him. On good days I would stare at it and remember him fondly. On bad days (which were much more frequent) I would fling it across the room and stomp on it and curse him for not being around, which I found quite therapeutic. But in the end, I always put it back on.

At any rate, during the weirdness at the museum—and I'm not making this up—the necklace got *hotter*. I nearly took it off, but I couldn't help wondering if it truly was protecting me somehow.

I'll make things right, Dad had said, with that guilty look he often gives me.

Well, colossal fail, Dad.

What had he been thinking? I wanted to believe it had all been a bad dream: the glowing hieroglyphs, the snake staff, the coffin. Things like that simply don't happen. But I knew better. I couldn't dream anything as horrifying as that fiery man's face when he'd turned on us. "Soon, boy," he'd told Carter, as if he intended to track us down. Just the idea made my hands tremble. I also couldn't help wondering about our stop at Cleopatra's Needle, how Dad had insisted on seeing it, as if he were steeling his courage, as if what he did at the British Museum had something to do with my mum.

My eyes wandered across my room and fixed on my desk.

No, I thought. *Not going to do it.*

But I walked over and opened the drawer. I shoved aside a few old mags, my stash of sweets, a stack of maths homework I'd forgotten to hand in, and a few pictures of me and my mates Liz and Emma trying on ridiculous hats in Camden Market. And there at the bottom of it all was the picture of Mum.

Gran and Gramps have loads of pictures. They keep a shrine to Ruby in the hall cupboard—Mum's childhood artwork, her O-level results, her graduation picture from university, her favorite jewelry. It's quite mental. I was determined not to be like them, living in the past. I barely remembered Mum, after all, and nothing could change the fact she was dead.

But I did keep the one picture. It was of Mum and me at our house in Los Angeles, just after I was born. She stood out on the balcony, the Pacific Ocean behind her, holding a wrinkled pudgy lump of baby that would some day grow up to be yours truly. Baby me was not much to look at, but Mum was gorgeous, even in shorts and a tattered T-shirt. Her eyes were deep blue. Her blond hair was clipped back. Her skin was perfect. Quite depressing compared to mine. People always say I look like her, but I couldn't even get the spot off my chin much less look so mature and beautiful.

[Stop smirking, Carter.]

The photo fascinated me because I hardly remembered our lives together at all. But the main reason I'd kept the photo was because of the symbol on Mum's T-shirt: one of those life symbols—an ankh.

My dead mother wearing the symbol for life. Nothing could've been sadder. But she smiled at the camera as if she knew a secret. As if my dad and she were sharing a private joke.

Something tugged at the back of my mind. That stocky man in the trench coat who'd been arguing with Dad across the street—he'd said something about the Per Ankh.

Had he meant *ankh* as in the symbol for life, and if so, what was a *per*? I supposed he didn't mean pear as in the fruit.

I had an eerie feeling that if I saw the words *Per Ankh* written in hieroglyphics, I would know what they meant.

I put down the picture of Mum. I picked up a pencil and turned over one of my old homework papers. I wondered what would happen if I tried to *draw* the words *Per Ankh.* Would the right design just occur to me?

As I touched pencil to paper, my bedroom door opened. "Miss Kane?"

I whirled and dropped the pencil.

A police inspector stood frowning in my doorway. "What are you doing?"

"Maths," I said.

My ceiling was quite low, so the inspector had to stoop to come in. He wore a lint-colored suit that matched his gray hair and his ashen face. "Now then, Sadie. I'm Chief Inspector Williams. Let's have a chat, shall we? Sit down."

I didn't sit, and neither did he, which must've annoyed him. It's hard to look in charge when you're hunched over like Quasimodo.

"Tell me everything, please," he said, "from the time your father came round to get you."

"I already told the police at the museum."

"Again, if you don't mind."

So I told him everything. Why not? His left eyebrow crept higher and higher as I told him the strange bits like the glowing letters and serpent staff.

"Well, Sadie," Inspector Williams said. "You've got quite an imagination."

"I'm not lying, Inspector. And I think your eyebrow is trying to escape."

He tried to look at his own eyebrows, then scowled. "Now, Sadie, I'm sure this is very hard on you. I understand you want to protect your father's reputation. But he's gone now—"

"You mean through the floor in a coffin," I insisted. "He's *not* dead."

Inspector Williams spread his hands. "Sadie, I'm very sorry. But we must find out why he did this act of…well…"

"Act of *what*?"

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Your father destroyed priceless artifacts and apparently killed himself in the process. We'd very much like to know why."

I stared at him. "Are you saying my father's a terrorist? Are you *mad*?"

"We've made calls to some of your father's associates. I understand his behavior had become erratic since your mother's death. He'd become withdrawn and obsessive in his studies, spending more and more time in Egypt—"

"He's a bloody Egyptologist! You should be looking for him, not asking stupid questions!"

"Sadie," he said, and I could hear in his voice that he was resisting the urge to strangle me. Strangely, I get this a lot from adults. "There are extremist groups in Egypt that object to Egyptian artifacts being kept in other countries' museums. These people might have approached your father. Perhaps in his state, your father became an easy target for them. If you've heard him mention any names—"

I stormed past him to the window. I was so angry I could hardly think. I refused to believe Dad was dead. No, no, no. And a terrorist? Please. Why did adults have to be so thick? They always say "tell the truth," and when you do, they don't believe you. What's the point?

I stared down at the dark street. Suddenly that cold tingly feeling got worse than ever. I focused on the dead tree where I'd met Dad earlier. Standing there now, in the dim light of a streetlamp, looking up at me, was the pudgy bloke in the black trench coat and the round glasses and the fedora—the man Dad had called Amos.

I suppose I should've felt threatened by an odd man staring up at me in the dark of night. But his expression was full of concern. And he looked *so* familiar. It was driving me mad that I couldn't remember why.

Behind me, the inspector cleared his throat. "Sadie, no one blames you for the attack on the museum. We understand you were dragged into this against your will."

I turned from the window. "Against my will? I chained the curator in his office."

The inspector's eyebrow started to creep up again. "Be that as it may, surely you didn't understand what your father meant to do. Possibly your brother was involved?"

I snorted. "Carter? Please."

"So you are determined to protect him as well. You consider him a proper brother, do you?"

I couldn't believe it. I wanted to smack his face. "What's that supposed to mean? Because he doesn't *look* like me?"

The inspector blinked. "I only meant—"

"I *know* what you meant. Of course he's my brother!"

Inspector Williams held up his hands apologetically, but I was still seething. As much as Carter annoyed me, I hated it when people assumed we weren't related, or looked at my father askance when he said the three of us were a family—like we'd done something wrong. Stupid Dr. Martin at the museum. Inspector Williams. It happened every time Dad and Carter and I were together. *Every* bloody time.

"I'm sorry, Sadie," the inspector said. "I only want to make sure we separate the innocent from the guilty. It will go much easier for everyone if you cooperate. Any information. Anything your father said. People he might've mentioned."

"Amos," I blurted out, just to see his reaction. "He met a man named Amos."

Inspector Williams sighed. "Sadie, he couldn't have done. Surely you know that. We spoke with Amos not one hour ago, on the phone from his home in New York."

"He isn't in New York!" I insisted. "He's right—"

I glanced out the window and Amos was gone. Bloody typical.

"That's not possible," I said.

"Exactly," the inspector said.

"But he was here!" I exclaimed. "Who *is* he? One of Dad's colleagues? How did you know to call him?"

"Really, Sadie. This acting must stop."

"Acting?"

The inspector studied me for a moment, then set his jaw as if he'd made a decision. "We've already had the truth from Carter. I didn't want to upset you, but he told us everything. He understands there's no point protecting your father now. You might as well help us, and there will be no charges against you."

"You shouldn't lie to children!" I yelled, hoping my voice carried all the way downstairs. "Carter would never say a word against Dad, and neither will I!"

The inspector didn't even have the decency to look embarrassed.

He crossed his arms. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Sadie. I'm afraid it's time we went downstairs…to discuss consequences with your grandparents."

SADIE

4. Kidnapped by a Not-So-Stranger

I JUST LOVE FAMILY MEETINGS. Very cozy, with the Christmas garlands round the fireplace and a nice pot of tea and a detective from Scotland Yard ready to arrest you.

Carter slumped on the sofa, cradling Dad's workbag. I wondered why the police had let him keep it. It should have been evidence or something, but the inspector didn't seem to notice it at all.

Carter looked awful—I mean even worse than usual. Honestly, the boy had never been in a proper school, and he dressed like a junior professor, with his khaki trousers and a button-down shirt and loafers. He's not bad looking, I suppose. He's reasonably tall and fit and his hair isn't hopeless. He's got Dad's eyes, and my mates Liz and Emma have even told me from his picture that he's *hot,* which I must take with a grain of salt because (a) he's my brother, and (b) my mates are a bit crazed. When it came to clothes, Carter wouldn't have known *hot* if it bit him on the bum.

[Oh, don't look at me like that, Carter. You know it's *true.*]

At any rate, I shouldn't have been too hard on him. He was taking Dad's disappearance even worse than I was.

Gran and Gramps sat on either side of him, looking quite nervous. The pot of tea and a plate of biscuits sat on the table, but no one was having any. Chief Inspector Williams ordered me into the only free chair. Then he paced in front of the fireplace importantly. Two more police stood by the front door—the woman from earlier and a big bloke who kept eyeing the biscuits.

"Mr. and Mrs. Faust," Inspector Williams said, "I'm afraid we have two uncooperative children."

Gran fidgeted with the trim of her dress. It's hard to believe she's related to Mum. Gran is frail and colorless, like a stick person really, while Mum in the photos always looked so happy and full of life. "They're just children," she managed. "Surely you can't blame them."

"Pah!" Gramps said. "This is ridiculous, Inspector. They aren't responsible!"

Gramps is a former rugby player. He has beefy arms, a belly much too big for his shirt, and eyes sunk deep in his face, as if someone had punched them (well, actually Dad *had* punched them years ago, but that's another story). Gramps is quite scary looking. Usually people got out of his way, but Inspector Williams didn't seem impressed.

"Mr. Faust," he said, "what do you imagine the morning headlines will read? 'British Museum attacked. Rosetta Stone destroyed.' Your son-in-law—"

"Former son-in-law," Gramps corrected.

"—was most likely vaporized in the explosion, or he ran off, in which case—"

"He didn't run off!" I shouted.

"We need to know where he is," the inspector continued. "And the only witnesses, your grandchildren, refuse to tell me the truth."

"We *did* tell you the truth," Carter said. "Dad isn't dead. He sank through the floor."

Inspector Williams glanced at Gramps, as if to say, *There, you see?* Then he turned to Carter. "Young man, your father has committed a criminal act. He's left you behind to deal with the consquences—"

"That's not true!" I snapped, my voice trembling with rage. I couldn't believe Dad would intentionally leave us at the mercy of police, of course. But the idea of him abandoning me—well, as I might have mentioned, that's a bit of a sore point.

"Dear, please," Gran told me, "the inspector is only doing his job."

"Badly!" I said.

"Let's all have some tea," Gran suggested.

"No!" Carter and I yelled at once, which made me feel bad for Gran, as she practically wilted into the sofa.

"We *can* charge you," the inspector warned, turning on me. "We can and we will—"

He froze. Then he blinked several times, as if he'd forgotten what he was doing.

Gramps frowned. *"Er,* Inspector?"

"Yes…" Chief Inspector Williams murmured dreamily. He reached in his pocket and took out a little blue booklet—an American passport. He threw it in Carter's lap.

"You're being deported," the inspector announced. "You're to leave the country within twenty-four hours. If we need to question you further, you'll be contacted through the FBI."

Carter's mouth fell open. He looked at me, and I knew I wasn't imagining how odd this was. The inspector had completely changed direction. He'd been about to arrest us. I was sure of it. And then out of the blue, he was deporting Carter? Even the other police officers looked confused.

"Sir?" the policewoman asked. "Are you sure—"

"Quiet, Linley. The two of you may go."

The cops hesitated until Williams made a shooing motion with his hand. Then they left, closing the door behind them.

"Hold on," Carter said. "My father's disappeared, and you want me to leave the country?"

"Your father is either dead or a fugitive, son," the inspector said. "Deportation is the kindest option. It's already been arranged."

"With whom?" Gramps demanded. "Who authorized this?"

"With…" The inspector got that funny blank look again. "With the proper authorities. Believe me, it's better than prison."

Carter looked too devastated to speak, but before I could feel sorry for him, Inspector Williams turned to me. "You, too, miss."

He might as well have hit me with a sledgehammer.

"You're deporting *me*?" I asked. "I live here!"

"You're an American citizen. And under the circumstances, it's best for you to return home."

I just stared at him. I couldn't remember any home except this flat. My mates at school, my room, *everything* I knew was here. "Where am I supposed to go?"

"Inspector," Gran said, her voice trembling. "This isn't fair. I can't believe—"

"I'll give you some time to say good-bye," the inspector interrupted. Then he frowned as if baffled by his own actions. "I—I must be going."

This made no sense, and the inspector seemed to realize it, but he walked to the front door anyway. When he opened it, I almost jumped out of my chair, because the man in black, Amos, was standing there. He'd lost his trench coat and hat somewhere, but was still wearing the same pinstripe suit and round glasses. His braided hair glittered with gold beads.

I thought the inspector would say something, or express surprise, but he didn't even acknowledge Amos. He walked right past him and into the night.

Amos came inside and closed the door. Gran and Gramps stood up.

"You," Gramps growled. "I should've known. If I was younger, I would beat you to a pulp."

"Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Faust," Amos said. He looked at Carter and me as if we were problems to be solved. "It's time we had a talk."

Amos made himself right at home. He flopped onto the sofa and poured himself tea. He munched on a biscuit, which was quite dangerous, because Gran's biscuits are horrid.

I thought Gramps's head would explode. His face went bright red. He came up behind Amos and raised his hand as if he were about to smack him, but Amos kept munching his biscuit.

"Please, sit down," he told us.

And we all sat. It was the strangest thing—as if we'd been waiting for his order. Even Gramps dropped his hand and moved round the sofa. He sat next to Amos with a disgusted sigh.

Amos sipped his tea and regarded me with some displeasure. That wasn't fair, I thought. I didn't look *that* bad, considering what we'd been through. Then he looked at Carter and grunted.

"Terrible timing," he muttered. "But there's no other way. They'll have to come with me."

"Excuse me?" I said. "I'm not going anywhere with some strange man with biscuit on his face!"

He did in fact have biscuit crumbs on his face, but he apparently didn't care, as he didn't bother to check.

"I'm no stranger, Sadie," he said. "Don't you remember?"

It was creepy hearing him talk to me in such a familiar way. I felt I *should* know him. I looked at Carter, but he seemed just as mystified as I was.

"No, Amos," Gran said, trembling. "You can't take Sadie. We had an agreement."

"Julius broke that agreement tonight," Amos said. "You know you can't care for Sadie anymore—not after what's happened. Their only chance is to come with me."

"Why should we go anywhere with you?" Carter asked. "You almost got in a fight with Dad!"

Amos looked at the workbag in Carter's lap. "I see you kept your father's bag. That's good. You'll need it. As for getting into fights, Julius and I did that quite a lot. If you didn't notice, Carter, I was trying to *stop* him from doing something rash. If he'd listened to me, we wouldn't be in this situation."

I had no idea what he was on about, but Gramps apparently understood.

"You and your superstitions!" he said. "I told you we want none of it."

Amos pointed to the back patio. Through the glass doors, you could see the lights shining on the Thames. It was quite a nice view at night, when you couldn't notice how run-down some of the buildings were.

"Superstition, is it?" Amos asked. "And yet you found a place to live on the *east* bank of the river."

Gramps turned even redder. "That was Ruby's idea. Thought it would protect us. But she was wrong about many things, wasn't she? She trusted Julius and you, for one!"

Amos looked unfazed. He smelled interesting—like old-timey spices, copal and amber, like the incense shops in Covent Garden.

He finished his tea and looked straight at Gran. "Mrs. Faust, you know what's begun. The police are the least of your worries."

Gran swallowed. "You…*you* changed that inspector's mind. You made him deport Sadie."

"It was that or see the children arrested," Amos said.

"Hang on," I said. "You *changed* Inspector Williams's mind? How?"

Amos shrugged. "It's not permanent. In fact we should get to New York in the next hour or so before Inspector Williams begins to wonder why he let you go."

Carter laughed incredulously. "You can't get to New York from London in a hour. Not even the fastest plane—"

"No," Amos agreed. "Not a plane." He turned back to Gran as if everything had been settled. "Mrs. Faust, Carter and Sadie have only one safe option. You know that. They'll come to the mansion in Brooklyn. I can protect them there."

"You've got a mansion," Carter said. "In Brooklyn."

Amos gave him an amused smile. "The family mansion. You'll be safe there."

"But our dad—"

"Is beyond your help for now," Amos said sadly. "I'm sorry, Carter. I'll explain later, but Julius would want you to be safe. For that, we must move quickly. I'm afraid I'm all you've got."

That was a bit harsh, I thought. Carter glanced at Gran and Gramps. Then he nodded glumly. He knew that they didn't want him around. He'd always reminded them of our dad. And yes, it was a stupid reason not to take in your grandson, but there you are.

"Well, Carter can do what he wants," I said. "But *I live here.* And I'm not going off with some stranger, am I?"

I looked at Gran for support, but she was staring at the lace doilies on the table as if they were suddenly quite interesting.

"Gramps, surely…"

But he wouldn't meet my eyes either. He turned to Amos. "You can get them out of the country?"

"Hang on!" I protested.

Amos stood and wiped the crumbs off his jacket. He walked to the patio doors and stared out at the river. "The police will be back soon. Tell them anything you like. They won't find us."

"You're going to *kidnap* us?" I asked, stunned. I looked at Carter. "Do you believe this?"

Carter shouldered the workbag. Then he stood like he was ready to go. Possibly he just wanted to be out of Gran and Gramps's flat. "How do you plan to get to New York in an hour?" he asked Amos. "You said, not a plane."

"No," Amos agreed. He put his finger to the window and traced something in the condensation—another bloody hieroglyph.

"A boat," I said—then realized I'd translated aloud, which I wasn't supposed to be able to do.

Amos peered at me over the top of his round glasses. "How did you—"

"I mean that last bit looks like a boat," I blurted out. "But that can't be what you mean. That's ridiculous."

"Look!" Carter cried.

I pressed in next to him at the patio doors. Down at the quayside, a boat was docked. But not a regular boat, mind you. It was an Egyptian reed boat, with two torches burning in the front, and a big rudder in the back. A figure in a black trench coat and hat—possibly Amos's—stood at the tiller.

I'll admit, for once, I was at a loss for words.

"We're going in that," Carter said. "To Brooklyn."

"We'd better get started," Amos said.

I whirled back to my grandmother. "Gran, please!"

She brushed a tear from her cheek. "It's for the best, my dear. You should take Muffin."

"Ah, yes," Amos said. "We can't forget the cat."

He turned towards the stairs. As if on cue, Muffin raced down in a leopard-spotted streak and leaped into my arms. She *never* does that.

"Who are you?" I asked Amos. It was clear I was running out of options, but I at least wanted answers. "We can't just go off with some stranger."

"I'm not a stranger." Amos smiled at me. "I'm family."

And suddenly I remembered his face smiling down at me, saying, "Happy birthday, Sadie." A memory so distant, I'd almost forgotten.

"Uncle Amos?" I asked hazily.

"That's right, Sadie," he said. "I'm Julius's brother. Now come along. We have a long way to go."

5. We Meet the Monkey

IT'S CARTER AGAIN. SORRY. We had to turn off the tape for a while because we were being followed by—well, we'll get to that later.

Sadie was telling you how we left London, right?

So anyway, we followed Amos down to the weird boat docked at the quayside. I cradled Dad's workbag under my arm. I still couldn't believe he was gone. I felt guilty leaving London without him, but I believed Amos about one thing: right now Dad was beyond our help. I didn't trust Amos, but I figured if I wanted to find out what had happened to Dad, I was going to have to go along with him. He was the only one who seemed to know anything.

Amos stepped aboard the reed boat. Sadie jumped right on, but I hesitated. I'd seen boats like this on the Nile before, and they never seemed very sturdy.

It was basically woven together from coils of plant fiber—like a giant floating rug. I figured the torches at the front couldn't be a good idea, because if we didn't sink, we'd burn. At the back, the tiller was manned by a little guy wearing Amos's black trench coat and hat. The hat was shoved down on his head so I couldn't see his face. His hands and feet were lost in the folds of the coat.

"How does this thing move?" I asked Amos. "You've got no sail."

"Trust me." Amos offered me a hand.

The night was cold, but when I stepped on board I suddenly felt warmer, as if the torchlight were casting a protective glow over us. In the middle of the boat was a hut made from woven mats. From Sadie's arms, Muffin sniffed at it and growled.

"Take a seat inside," Amos suggested. "The trip might be a little rough."

"I'll stand, thanks." Sadie nodded at the little guy in back. "Who's your driver?"

Amos acted as if he hadn't heard the question. "Hang on, everyone!" He nodded to the steersman, and the boat lurched forward.

The feeling was hard to describe. You know that tingle in the pit of your stomach when you're on a roller coaster and it goes into free fall? It was kind of like that, except we weren't falling, and the feeling didn't go away. The boat moved with astounding speed. The lights of the city blurred, then were swallowed in a thick fog. Strange sounds echoed in the dark: slithering and hissing, distant screams, voices whispering in languages I didn't understand.

The tingling turned to nausea. The sounds got louder, until I was about to scream myself. Then suddenly the boat slowed. The noises stopped, and the fog dissipated. City lights came back, brighter than before.

Above us loomed a bridge, much taller than any bridge in London. My stomach did a slow roll. To the left, I saw a familiar skyline—the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building.

"Impossible," I said. "That's New York."

Sadie looked as green as I felt. She was still cradling Muffin, whose eyes were closed. The cat seemed to be purring. "It can't be," Sadie said. "We only traveled a few minutes."

And yet here we were, sailing up the East River, right under the Williamsburg Bridge. We glided to a stop next to a small dock on the Brooklyn side of the river. In front of us was an industrial yard filled with piles of scrap metal and old construction equipment. In the center of it all, right at the water's edge, rose a huge factory warehouse heavily painted with graffiti, the windows boarded up.

"That is not a mansion," Sadie said. Her powers of perception are really amazing.

"Look again." Amos pointed to the top of the building.

"How…how did you…" My voice failed me. I wasn't sure why I hadn't seen it before, but now it was obvious: a five-story mansion perched on the roof of the warehouse, like another layer of a cake. "You couldn't build a mansion up there!"

"Long story," Amos said. "But we needed a private location."

"And is this the east shore?" Sadie asked. "You said something about that in London—my grandparents living on the east shore."

Amos smiled. "Yes. Very good, Sadie. In ancient times, the east bank of the Nile was always the side of the living, the side where the sun rises. The dead were buried west of the river. It was considered bad luck, even dangerous, to live there. The tradition is still strong among…our people."

"Our people?" I asked, but Sadie muscled in with another question.

"So you can't live in Manhattan?" she asked.

Amos's brow furrowed as he looked across at the Empire State Building. "Manhattan has other problems. Other gods. It's best we stay separate."

"Other *what*?" Sadie demanded.

"Nothing." Amos walked past us to the steersman. He plucked off the man's hat and coat—and there was no one underneath. The steersman simply wasn't there. Amos put on his fedora, folded his coat over his arm, then waved toward a metal staircase that wound all the way up the side of the warehouse to the mansion on the roof.

"All ashore," he said. "And welcome to the Twenty-first Nome."

"Gnome?" I asked, as we followed him up the stairs. "Like those little runty guys?"

"Heavens, no," Amos said. "I hate gnomes. They smell horrible."

"But you said—"

"Nome, n-o-m-e. As in a district, a region. The term is from ancient times, when Egypt was divided into forty-two provinces. Today, the system is a little different. We've gone global. The world is divided into three hundred and sixty nomes. Egypt, of course, is the First. Greater New York is the Twenty-first."

Sadie glanced at me and twirled her finger around her temple.

"No, Sadie," Amos said without looking back. "I'm not crazy. There's much you need to learn."

We reached the top of the stairs. Looking up at the mansion, it was hard to understand what I was seeing. The house was at least fifty feet tall, built of enormous limestone blocks and steel-framed

windows. There were hieroglyphs engraved around the windows, and the walls were lit up so the place looked like a cross between a modern museum and an ancient temple. But the weirdest thing was that if I glanced away, the whole building seemed to disappear. I tried it several times just to be sure. If I looked for the mansion from the corner of my eye, it wasn't there. I had to force my eyes to refocus on it, and even that took a lot of willpower.

Amos stopped before the entrance, which was the size of a garage door—a dark heavy square of timber with no visible handle or lock. "Carter, after you."

"Um, how do I—"

"How do you think?"

Great, another mystery. I was about to suggest we ram Amos's head against it and see if that worked. Then I looked at the door again, and I had the strangest feeling. I stretched out my arm. Slowly, without touching the door, I raised my hand and the door followed my movement—sliding upward until it disappeared into the ceiling.

Sadie looked stunned. "How…"

"I don't know," I admitted, a little embarrassed. "Motion sensor, maybe?"

"Interesting." Amos sounded a little troubled. "Not the way I would've done it, but very good. Remarkably good."

"Thanks, I think."

Sadie tried to go inside first, but as soon as she stepped on the threshold, Muffin wailed and almost clawed her way out of Sadie's arms.

Sadie stumbled backward. "What was that about, cat?"

"Oh, of course," Amos said. "My apologies." He put his hand on the cat's head and said, very formally, "You may enter."

"The cat needs permission?" I asked.

"Special circumstances," Amos said, which wasn't much of an explanation, but he walked inside without saying another word. We followed, and this time Muffin stayed quiet.

"Oh my god…" Sadie's jaw dropped. She craned her neck to look at the ceiling, and I thought the gum might fall out of her mouth.

"Yes," Amos said. "This is the Great Room."

I could see why he called it that. The cedar-beamed ceiling was four stories high, held up by carved stone pillars engraved with hieroglyphs. A weird assortment of musical instruments and Ancient Egyptian weapons decorated the walls. Three levels of balconies ringed the room, with rows of doors all looking out on the main area. The fireplace was big enough to park a car in, with a plasma-screen TV above the mantel and massive leather sofas on either side. On the floor was a snakeskin rug, except it was forty feet long and fifteen feet wide—bigger than any snake. Outside, through glass walls, I could see the terrace that wrapped around the house. It had a swimming pool, a dining area, and a blazing fire pit. And at the far end of the Great Room was a set of double doors marked with the Eye of Horus, and chained with half a dozen padlocks. I wondered what could possibly be behind them.

But the real showstopper was the statue in the center of the Great Room. It was thirty feet tall, made of black marble. I could tell it was of an Egyptian god because the figure had a human body and

an animal's head—like a stork or a crane, with a long neck and a really long beak.

The god was dressed ancient-style in a kilt, sash, and neck collar. He held a scribe's stylus in one hand, and an open scroll in the other, as if he had just written the hieroglyphs inscribed there: an ankh—the Egyptian looped cross—with a rectangle traced around its top.

"That's it!" Sadie exclaimed. "Per Ankh."

I stared at her in disbelief. "All right, how can you read that?"

"I don't know," she said. "But it's obvious, isn't it? The top one is shaped like the floor plan of a house."

"How did you get that? It's just a box." The thing was, she was right. I recognized the symbol, and it *was* supposed to be a simplified picture of a house with a doorway, but that wouldn't be obvious to most people, especially people named Sadie. Yet she looked absolutely positive.

"It's a house," she insisted. "And the bottom picture is the ankh, the symbol for life. Per Ankh—the House of Life."

"Very good, Sadie." Amos looked impressed. "And this is a statue of the only god still allowed in the House of Life—at least, normally. Do you recognize him, Carter?"

Just then it clicked: the bird was an ibis, an Egyptian river bird. "Thoth," I said. "The god of knowledge. He invented writing."

"Indeed," Amos said.

"Why the animal heads?" Sadie asked. "All those Egyptian gods have animal heads. They look so silly."

"They don't normally appear that way," Amos said. "Not in real life."

"Real life?" I asked. "Come on. You sound like you've met them in person."

Amos's expression didn't reassure me. He looked as if he were remembering something unpleasant. "The gods could appear in many forms—usually fully human or fully animal, but occasionally as a hybrid form like this. They are primal forces, you understand, a sort of bridge between humanity and nature. They are depicted with animal heads to show that they exist in two different worlds at once. Do you understand?"

"Not even a little," Sadie said.

"Mmm." Amos didn't sound surprised. "Yes, we have much training to do. At any rate, the god before you, Thoth, founded the House of Life, for which this mansion is the regional headquarters. Or at least…it used to be. I'm the only member left in the Twenty-first Nome. Or I *was,* until you two came along."

"Hang on." I had so many questions I could hardly think where to start. "What *is* the House of Life? Why is Thoth the only god allowed here, and why are you—"

"Carter, I understand how you feel." Amos smiled sympathetically. "But these things are better discussed in daylight. You need to get some sleep, and I don't want you to have nightmares."

"You think I can sleep?"

"Mrow." Muffin stretched in Sadie's arms and let loose a huge yawn.

Amos clapped his hands. "Khufu!"

I thought he'd sneezed, because Khufu is a weird name, but then a little dude about three feet tall with gold fur and a purple shirt came clambering down the stairs. It took me a second to realize it was a baboon wearing an L.A. Lakers jersey.

The baboon did a flip and landed in front of us. He showed off his fangs and made a sound that was half roar, half belch. His breath smelled like nacho-flavored Doritos.

All I could think to say was, "The Lakers are my home team!"

The baboon slapped his head with both hands and belched again.

"Oh, Khufu likes you," Amos said. "You'll get along famously."

"Right." Sadie looked dazed. "You've got a monkey butler. Why not?"

Muffin purred in Sadie's arms as if the baboon didn't bother her at all.

"Agh!" Khufu grunted at me.

Amos chuckled. "He wants to go one-on-one with you, Carter. To, ah, see your game."

I shifted from foot to foot. "Um, yeah. Sure. Maybe tomorrow. But how can you understand—"

"Carter, I'm afraid you'll have a lot to get used to," Amos said. "But if you're going to survive and save your father, you have to get some rest."

"Sorry," Sadie said, "did you say 'survive and save our father'? Could you expand on that?"

"Tomorrow," Amos said. "We'll begin your orientation in the morning. Khufu, show them to their rooms, please."

"Agh-uhh!" the baboon grunted. He turned and waddled up the stairs. Unfortunately, the Lakers jersey didn't completely cover his multicolored rear.

We were about to follow when Amos said, "Carter, the workbag, please. It's best if I lock it in the library."

I hesitated. I'd almost forgotten the bag on my shoulder, but it was all I had left of my father. I didn't even have our luggage because it was still locked up at the British Museum. Honestly, I'd been surprised that the police hadn't taken the workbag too, but none of them seemed to notice it.

"You'll get it back," Amos promised. "When the time is right."

He asked nicely enough, but something in his eyes told me that I really didn't have a choice.

I handed over the bag. Amos took it gingerly, as if it were full of explosives.

"See you in the morning." He turned and strode toward the chained-up doors. They unlatched themselves and opened just enough for Amos to slip through without showing us anything on the other side. Then the chains locked again behind him.

I looked at Sadie, unsure what to do. Staying by ourselves in the Great Room with the creepy statue of Thoth didn't seem like much fun, so we followed Khufu up the stairs.

Sadie and I got adjoining rooms on the third floor, and I've got to admit, they were way cooler than any place I'd ever stayed before.

I had my own kitchenette, fully stocked with my favorite snacks: ginger ale—[No, Sadie. It's not an old person's soda! Be quiet!]—Twix, and Skittles. It seemed impossible. How did Amos know

what I liked? The TV, computer, and stereo system were totally high-tech. The bathroom was stocked with my regular brand of toothpaste, deodorant, everything. The king-size bed was awesome, too, though the pillow was a little strange. Instead of a cloth pillow, it was an ivory headrest like I'd seen in Egyptian tombs. It was decorated with lions and (of course) more hieroglyphs.

The room even had a deck that looked out on New York Harbor, with views of Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty in the distance, but the sliding glass doors were locked shut somehow. That was my first indication that something was wrong.

I turned to look for Khufu, but he was gone. The door to my room was shut. I tried to open it, but it was locked.

A muffled voice came from the next room. "Carter?"

"Sadie." I tried the door to her adjoining room, but it was locked too.

"We're prisoners," she said. "Do you think Amos…I mean, can we trust him?"

After all I'd seen today, I didn't trust anything, but I could hear the fear in Sadie's voice. It triggered an unfamiliar feeling in me, like I needed to reassure her. The idea seemed ridiculous. Sadie had always seemed so much braver than me—doing what she wanted, never caring about the consequences. I was the one who got scared. But right now, I felt like I needed to play a role I hadn't played in a long, long time: big brother.

"It'll be okay." I tried to sound confident. "Look, if Amos wanted to hurt us, he could've done it by now. Try to get some sleep."

"Carter?"

"Yeah?"

"It was magic, wasn't it? What happened to Dad at the museum. Amos's boat. This house. All of it's magic."

"I think so."

I could hear her sigh. "Good. At least I'm not going mad."

"Don't let the bedbugs bite," I called. And I realized I hadn't said that to Sadie since we had lived together in Los Angeles, when Mom was still alive.

"I miss Dad," she said. "I hardly ever saw him, I know, but…I miss him."

My eyes got a little teary, but I took a deep breath. I was *not* going to go all weak. Sadie needed me. Dad needed us.

"We'll find him," I told her. "Pleasant dreams."

I listened, but the only thing I heard was Muffin meowing and scampering around, exploring her new space. At least *she* didn't seem unhappy.

I got ready for bed and crawled in. The covers were comfortable and warm, but the pillow was just too weird. It gave me neck cramps, so I put it on the floor and went to sleep without it.

My first big mistake.

6. Breakfast with a Crocodile

HOW TO DESCRIBE IT? Not a nightmare. It was much more real and frightening.

As I slept, I felt myself go weightless. I drifted up, turned, and saw my own sleeping form below.

I'm dying, I thought. But that wasn't it, either. I wasn't a ghost. I had a new shimmering golden form with wings instead of arms. I was some kind of bird. [No, Sadie, not a chicken. Will you let me tell the story, please?]

I knew I wasn't dreaming, because I don't dream in color. I certainly don't dream in all five senses. The room smelled faintly of jasmine. I could hear the carbonation bubbles pinging in the can of ginger ale I'd opened on my nightstand. I could feel a cold wind ruffling through my feathers, and I realized the windows were open. I didn't want to leave, but a strong current pulled me out of the room like a leaf in a storm.

The lights of the mansion faded below me. The skyline of New York blurred and disappeared. I shot through the mist and darkness, strange voices whispering all around me. My stomach tingled as it had earlier that night on Amos's barge. Then the mist cleared, and I was in a different place.

I floated above a barren mountain. Far below, a grid of city lights stretched across the valley floor. Definitely not New York. It was nighttime, but I could tell I was in the desert. The wind was so dry, the skin on my face was like paper. And I know that doesn't make sense, but my face felt like my normal face, as if that part of me hadn't transformed into a bird. [Fine, Sadie. Call me the Carter-headed chicken. Happy?]

Below me on a ridge stood two figures. They didn't seem to notice me, and I realized I wasn't glowing anymore. In fact I was pretty much invisible, floating in the darkness. I couldn't make out the two figures clearly, except to recognize that they weren't human. Staring harder, I could see that one was short, squat, and hairless, with slimy skin that glistened in the starlight—like an amphibian standing on its hind legs. The other was tall and scarecrow skinny, with rooster claws instead of feet. I couldn't see his face very well, but it looked red and moist and…well, let's just say I was glad I couldn't see it better.

"Where is he?" the toadie-looking one croaked nervously.

"Hasn't taken a permanent host yet," the rooster-footed guy chided. "He can only appear for a short time."

"You're sure this is the place?"

"Yes, fool! He'll be here as soon—"

A fiery form appeared on the ridge. The two creatures fell to the ground, groveling in the dirt, and I prayed like crazy that I really was invisible.

"My lord!" the toad said.

Even in the dark, the newcomer was hard to see—just the silhouette of a man outlined in flames.

"What do they call this place?" the man asked. And as soon as he spoke, I knew for sure he was the guy who'd attacked my dad at the British Museum. All the fear I'd felt at the museum came rushing back, paralyzing me. I remembered trying to pick up that stupid rock to throw, but I hadn't been able to do even that. I'd completely failed my dad.

"My lord," Rooster Foot said. "The mountain is called Camelback. The city is called Phoenix."

The fiery man laughed—a booming sound like thunder. "Phoenix. How appropriate! And the desert so much like home. All it needs now is to be scoured of life. The desert should be a sterile place, don't you think?"

"Oh yes, my lord," the toadie agreed. "But what of the other four?"

"One is already entombed," the fiery man said. "The second is weak. She will be easily manipulated. That leaves only two. And they will be dealt with soon enough."

"Er…how?" the toadie asked.

The fiery man glowed brighter. "You are an inquisitive little tadpole, aren't you?" He pointed at the toad and the poor creature's skin began to steam.

"No!" the toadie begged. "No-o-o-o!"

I could hardly watch. I don't want to describe it. But if you've heard what happens when cruel kids pour salt on snails, you'll have a pretty good idea of what happened to the toadie. Soon there was nothing left.

Rooster Foot took a nervous step back. I couldn't blame him.

"We will build my temple here," the fiery man said, as if nothing had happened. "This mountain shall serve as my place of worship. When it is complete, I will summon the greatest storm ever known. I will cleanse everything. *Everything*."

"Yes, my lord," Rooster Foot agreed quickly. "And, ah, if I may suggest, my lord, to increase your power…" The creature bowed and scraped and moved forward, as if he wanted to whisper in the fiery man's ear.

Just when I thought Rooster Foot was going to become fried chicken for sure, he said something to the fiery dude that I couldn't make out, and the fiery dude burned brighter.

"Excellent! If you can do this, you will be rewarded. If not…"

"I understand, my lord."

"Go then," the fiery man said. "Unleash our forces. Start with the longnecks. That should soften them up. Collect the younglings and bring them to me. I want them alive, before they have time to learn their powers. Do not fail me."

"No, lord."

"Phoenix," the fiery man mused. "I like that very much." He swept his hand across the horizon, as if he were imagining the city in flames. "Soon I will rise from your ashes. It will be a lovely birthday present."

I woke with my heart pounding, back in my own body. I felt hot, as if the fiery guy were starting to burn me. Then I realized that there was a cat on my chest.

Muffin stared at me, her eyes half closed. *"Mrow."*

"How did you get in?" I muttered.

I sat up, and for a second I wasn't sure where I was. Some hotel in another city? I almost called for my dad…and then I remembered.

Yesterday. The museum. The sarcophagus.

It all crashed down on me so hard I could barely breathe.

Stop, I told myself. *You don't have time for grief.* And this is going to sound weird, but the voice in my head almost sounded like a different person—older, stronger. Either that was a good sign, or I was going crazy.

Remember what you saw, the voice said. He's after you. *You have to be ready.*

I shivered. I wanted to believe I'd just had a bad dream, but I knew better. I'd *been* through too much in the last day to doubt what I'd seen. Somehow, I'd actually left my body while I slept. I'd been to Phoenix—thousands of miles away. The fiery dude was there. I hadn't understood much of what he'd said, but he'd talked about sending his forces to capture the younglings. Gee, wonder who that could be?

Muffin jumped off the bed and sniffed at the ivory headrest, looking up at me as if she were trying to tell me something.

"You can have it," I told her. "It's uncomfortable."

She butted her head against it and stared at me accusingly. *"Mrow."*

"Whatever, cat."

I got up and showered. When I tried to get dressed, I found that my old clothes had disappeared in the night. Everything in the closet was my size, but way different than what I was used to—baggy drawstring pants and loose shirts, all plain white linen, and robes for cold weather, kind of what the *fellahin*, the peasants in Egypt, wear. It wasn't exactly my style.

Sadie likes to tell me that I don't *have* a style. She complains that I dress like I'm an old man—button-down shirt, slacks, dress shoes. Okay, maybe. But here's the thing. My dad had always drilled into my head that I had to dress my best.

I remember the first time he explained it to me. I was ten. We were on our way to the airport in Athens, and it was like 112 degrees outside, and I was complaining that I wanted to wear shorts and a T-shirt. Why couldn't I be comfortable? We weren't going anywhere important that day—just traveling.

My dad put his hand on my shoulder. "Carter, you're getting older. You're an African American man. People will judge you more harshly, and so you must always look impeccable."

"That isn't fair!" I insisted.

"Fairness does not mean everyone gets the same," Dad said. "Fairness means everyone gets what they need. And the only way to get what you need is to make it happen *yourself*. Do you understand?"

I told him I didn't. But still I did what he asked—like caring about Egypt, and basketball, and music. Like traveling with only one suitcase. I dressed the way Dad wanted me to, because Dad was usually right. In fact I'd never known him to be wrong…until the night at the British Museum.

Anyway, I put on the linen clothes from the closet. The slipper shoes were comfortable, though I

doubted they'd be much good to run in.

The door to Sadie's room was open, but she wasn't there.

Thankfully my bedroom door wasn't locked anymore. Muffin joined me and we walked downstairs, passing a lot of unoccupied bedrooms on the way. The mansion could've easily slept a hundred people, but instead it felt empty and sad.

Down in the Great Room, Khufu the baboon sat on the sofa with a basketball between his legs and a chunk of strange-looking meat in his hands. It was covered in pink feathers. ESPN was on the television, and Khufu was watching highlights from the games the night before.

"Hey," I said, though I felt a little weird talking to him. "Lakers win?"

Khufu looked at me and patted his basketball like he wanted a game. *"Agh, agh."*

He had a pink feather hanging from his chin, and the sight made my stomach do a slow roll.

"Um, yeah," I said. "We'll play later, okay?"

I could see Sadie and Amos out on the terrace, eating breakfast by the pool. It should've been freezing out there, but the fire pit was blazing, and neither Amos nor Sadie looked cold. I headed their way, then hesitated in front of the statue of Thoth. In the daylight, the bird-headed god didn't look quite so scary. Still, I could swear those beady eyes were watching me expectantly.

What had the fiery guy said last night? Something about catching us before we learned our powers. It sounded ridiculous, but for a moment I felt a surge of strength—like the night before when I'd opened the front door just by raising my hand. I felt like I could lift anything, even this thirty-foot-tall statue if I wanted to. In a kind of trance, I stepped forward.

Muffin meowed impatiently and butted my foot. The feeling dissolved.

"You're right," I told the cat. "Stupid idea."

Besides, I could smell breakfast now—French toast, bacon, hot chocolate—and I couldn't blame Muffin for being in a hurry. I followed her out to the terrace.

"Ah, Carter," Amos said. "Merry Christmas, my boy. Join us."

"About time," Sadie grumbled. "I've been up for ages."

But she held my eyes for a moment, like she was thinking the same thing I was: *Christmas.* We hadn't spent a Christmas morning together since Mom died. I wondered if Sadie remembered how we used to make god's-eye decorations out of yarn and Popsicle sticks.

Amos poured himself a cup of coffee. His clothes were similar to those he'd worn the day before, and I had to admit the guy had style. His tailored suit was made of blue wool, he wore a matching fedora, and his hair was freshly braided with dark blue lapis lazuli, one of the stones the Egyptians often used for jewelry. Even his glasses matched. The round lenses were tinted blue. A tenor sax rested on a stand near the fire pit, and I could totally picture him playing out here, serenading the East River.

As for Sadie, she was dressed in a white linen pajama outfit like me, but somehow she'd managed to keep her combat boots. She'd probably slept with them on. She looked pretty comical with the red-streaked hair and the outfit, but since I wasn't dressed any better, I could hardly make fun of her.

"Um…Amos?" I asked. "You didn't have any pet birds, did you? Khufu's eating something with pink feathers."

"Mmm." Amos sipped his coffee. "Sorry if that disturbed you. Khufu's very picky. He only eats foods that end in *-o*. Doritos, burritos, flamingos."

I blinked. "Did you say—"

"Carter," Sadie warned. She looked a little queasy, like she'd already had this conversation. "Don't ask."

"Okay," I said. "Not asking."

"Please, Carter, help yourself." Amos waved toward a buffet table piled high with food. "Then we can get started with the explanations."

I didn't see any flamingo on the buffet table, which was fine by me, but there was just about everything else. I snagged some pancakes with butter and syrup, some bacon, and a glass of OJ.

Then I noticed movement in the corner of my eye. I glanced at the swimming pool. Something long and pale was gliding just under the surface of the water.

I almost dropped my plate. "Is that—"

"A crocodile," Amos confirmed. "For good luck. He's albino, but please don't mention that. He's sensitive."

"His name is Philip of Macedonia," Sadie informed me.

I wasn't sure how Sadie was taking this all so calmly, but I figured if she wasn't freaking out, I shouldn't either.

"That's a long name," I said.

"He's a long crocodile," Sadie said. "Oh, and he likes bacon."

To prove her point, she tossed a piece of bacon over her shoulder. Philip lunged out of the water and snapped up the treat. His hide was pure white and his eyes were pink. His mouth was so big, he could've snapped up an entire pig.

"He's quite harmless to my friends," Amos assured me. "In the old days, no temple would be complete without a lake full of crocodiles. They are powerful magic creatures."

"Right," I said. "So the baboon, the crocodile…any other pets I should know about?"

Amos thought for a moment. "Visible ones? No, I think that's it."

I took a seat as far from the pool as possible. Muffin circled my legs and purred. I hoped she had enough sense to stay away from magic crocodiles named Philip.

"So, Amos," I said between bites of pancake. "Explanations."

"Yes," he agreed. "Where to start…"

"Our dad," Sadie suggested. "What happened to him?"

Amos took a deep breath. "Julius was attempting to summon a god. Unfortunately, it worked."

It was kind of hard to take Amos seriously, talking about summoning gods while he spread butter on a bagel.

"Any god in particular?" I asked casually. "Or did he just order a generic god?"

Sadie kicked me under the table. She was scowling, as if she actually believed what Amos was saying.

Amos took a bite of bagel. "There are many Egyptian gods, Carter. But your dad was after one in

particular."

He looked at me meaningfully.

"Osiris," I remembered. "When Dad was standing in front of the Rosetta Stone, he said, 'Osiris, come.' But Osiris is a legend. He's make-believe."

"I wish that were true." Amos stared across the East River at the Manhattan skyline, gleaming in the morning sun. "The Ancient Egyptians were not fools, Carter. They built the pyramids. They created the first great nation state. Their civilization lasted thousands of years."

"Yeah," I said. "And now they're gone."

Amos shook his head. "A legacy that powerful does not disappear. Next to the Egyptians, the Greeks and Romans were babies. Our modern nations like Great Britain and America? Blinks of an eye. The very oldest root of civilization, at least of Western civilization, is Egypt. Look at the pyramid on the dollar bill. Look at the Washington Monument—the world's largest Egyptian obelisk. Egypt is still very much alive. And so, unfortunately, are her gods."

"Come on," I argued. "I mean…even if I believe there's a real thing called magic. Believing in ancient gods is totally different. You're joking, right?"

But as I said it, I thought about the fiery guy in the museum, the way his face had shifted between human and animal. And the statue of Thoth—how its eyes had followed me.

"Carter," Amos said, "the Egyptians would not have been stupid enough to believe in imaginary gods. The beings they described in their myths are very, very real. In the old days, the priests of Egypt would call upon these gods to channel their power and perform great feats. That is the origin of what we now call magic. Like many things, magic was first invented by the Egyptians. Each temple had a branch of magicians called the House of Life. Their magicians were famed throughout the ancient world."

"And you're an Egyptian magician."

Amos nodded. "So was your father. You saw it for yourself last night."

I hesitated. It was hard to deny my dad had done some weird stuff at the museum—some stuff that looked like magic.

"But he's an archaeologist," I said stubbornly.

"That's his cover story. You'll remember that he specialized in translating ancient spells, which are very difficult to understand unless you work magic yourself. Our family, the Kane family, has been part of the House of Life almost since the beginning. And your mother's family is almost as ancient."

"The Fausts?" I tried to imagine Grandma and Grandpa Faust doing magic, but unless watching rugby on TV and burning cookies was magical, I couldn't see it.

"They had not practiced magic for many generations," Amos admitted. "Not until your mother came along. But yes, a very ancient bloodline."

Sadie shook her head in disbelief. "So now Mum was magic, too. Are you joking?"

"No jokes," Amos promised. "The two of you…you combine the blood of two ancient families, both of which have a long, complicated history with the gods. You are the most powerful Kane children to be born in many centuries."

I tried to let that sink in. At the moment, I didn't feel powerful. I felt queasy. "You're telling me our parents secretly worshipped animal-headed gods?" I asked.

"Not worshipped," Amos corrected. "By the end of the ancient times, Egyptians had learned that their gods were not to be worshipped. They are powerful beings, primeval forces, but they are not divine in the sense one might think of God. They are created entities, like mortals, only much more powerful. We can respect them, fear them, use their power, or even fight them to keep them under control—"

"*Fight* gods?" Sadie interrupted.

"Constantly," Amos assured her. "But we don't worship them. Thoth taught us that."

I looked at Sadie for help. The old guy had to be crazy. But Sadie was looking like she believed every word.

"So…" I said. "Why did Dad break the Rosetta Stone?"

"Oh, I'm sure he didn't mean to break it," Amos said. "That would've horrified him. In fact, I imagine my brethren in London have repaired the damage by now. The curators will soon check their vaults and discover that the Rosetta Stone miraculously survived the explosion."

"But it was blown into a million pieces!" I said. "How could they repair it?"

Amos picked up a saucer and threw it onto the stone floor. The saucer shattered instantly.

"That was *to destroy,*" Amos said. "I could've done it by magic—*ha-di*—but it's simpler just to smash it. And now…" Amos held out his hand. "Join. *Hi-nehm.*"

A blue hieroglyphic symbol burned in the air above his palm.

The pieces of the saucer flew into his hand and reassembled like a puzzle, even the smallest bits of dust gluing themselves into place. Amos put the perfect saucer back on the table.

"Some trick," I managed. I tried to sound calm about it, but I was thinking of all the odd things that had happened to my dad and me over the years, like those gunmen in the Cairo hotel who'd ended up hanging by their feet from a chandelier. Was it possible my dad had made that happen with some kind of spell?

Amos poured milk in the saucer, and put it on the floor. Muffin came padding over. "At any rate, your father would never intentionally damage a relic. He simply didn't realize how much power the Rosetta Stone contained. You see, as Egypt faded, its magic collected and concentrated into its remaining relics. Most of these, of course, are still in Egypt. But you can find some in almost every major museum. A magician can use these artifacts as focal points to work more powerful spells."

"I don't get it," I said.

Amos spread his hands. "I'm sorry, Carter. It takes years of study to understand magic, and I'm trying to explain it to you in a single morning. The important thing is, for the past six years your father has been looking for a way to summon Osiris, and last night he thought he had found the right artifact to do it."

"Wait, why did he want Osiris?"

Sadie gave me a troubled look. "Carter, Osiris was the lord of the dead. Dad was talking about making things right. He was talking about Mum."

Suddenly the morning seemed colder. The fire pit sputtered in the wind coming off the river.

"He wanted to bring Mom back from the dead?" I said. "But that's crazy!"

Amos hesitated. "It would've been dangerous. Inadvisable. Foolish. But not crazy. Your father is a powerful magician. If, in fact, that is what he was after, he might have accomplished it, using the power of Osiris."

I stared at Sadie. "You're actually buying this?"

"You saw the magic at the museum. The fiery bloke. Dad summoned something from the stone."

"Yeah," I said, thinking of my dream. "But that wasn't Osiris, was it?"

"No," Amos said. "Your father got more than he bargained for. He did release the spirit of Osiris. In fact, I think he successfully joined with the god—"

"Joined with?"

Amos held up his hand. "Another long conversation. For now, let's just say he drew the power of Osiris into himself. But he never got the chance to use it because, according to what Sadie has told me, it appears that Julius released *five* gods from the Rosetta Stone. Five gods who were all trapped together."

I glanced at Sadie. "You told him everything?"

"He's going to help us, Carter."

I wasn't quite ready to trust this guy, even if he was our uncle, but I decided I didn't have much choice.

"Okay, yeah," I said. "The fiery guy said something like 'You released all five.' What did he mean?"

Amos sipped his coffee. The faraway look on his face reminded me of my dad. "I don't want to scare you."

"Too late."

"The gods of Egypt are very dangerous. For the last two thousand years or so, we magicians have spent much of our time binding and banishing them whenever they appear. In fact, our most important law, issued by Chief Lector Iskandar in Roman times, forbids unleashing the gods or using their power. Your father broke that law once before."

Sadie's face paled. "Does this have something to do with Mum's death? Cleopatra's Needle in London?"

"It has *everything* to do with that, Sadie. Your parents…well, they thought they were doing something good. They took a terrible risk, and it cost your mother her life. Your father took the blame. He was exiled, I suppose you would say. Banished. He was forced to move around constantly because the House monitored his activities. They feared he would continue his…research. As indeed he did."

I thought about the times Dad would look over his shoulder as he copied some ancient inscriptions, or wake me up at three or four in the morning and insist it was time to change hotels, or warn me not to look in his workbag or copy certain pictures from old temple walls—as if our lives depended on it.

"Is that why you never came round?" Sadie asked Amos. "Because Dad was banished?"

"The House forbade me to see him. I loved Julius. It hurt me to stay away from my brother, and from you children. But I could not see you—until last night, when I simply had no choice but to try to

help. Julius has been obsessed with finding Osiris for years. He was consumed with grief because of what happened to your mother. When I learned that Julius was about to break the law again, to try to set things right, I had to stop him. A second offense would've meant a death sentence. Unfortunately, I failed. I should've known he was too stubborn."

I looked down at my plate. My food had gotten cold. Muffin leaped onto the table and rubbed against my hand. When I didn't object, she started eating my bacon.

"Last night at the museum," I said, "the girl with the knife, the man with the forked beard—they were magicians too? From the House of Life?"

"Yes," Amos said. "Keeping an eye on your father. You are fortunate they let you go."

"The girl wanted to kill us," I remembered. "But the guy with the beard said, *not yet*."

"They don't kill unless it is absolutely necessary," Amos said. "They will wait to see if you are a threat."

"Why would we be a threat?" Sadie demanded. "We're children! The summoning wasn't our idea."

Amos pushed away his plate. "There is a reason you two were raised separately."

"Because the Fausts took Dad to court," I said matter-of-factly. "And Dad lost."

"It was much more than that," Amos said. "The House insisted you two be separated. Your father wanted to keep you both, even though he knew how dangerous it was."

Sadie looked like she'd been smacked between the eyes. "He did?"

"Of course. But the House intervened and made sure your grandparents got custody of you, Sadie. If you and Carter were raised together, you could become very powerful. Perhaps you have already sensed changes over the past day."

I thought about the surges of strength I'd been feeling, and the way Sadie suddenly seemed to know how to read Ancient Egyptian. Then I thought of something even further back.

"Your sixth birthday," I told Sadie.

"The cake," she said immediately, the memory passing between us like an electric spark.

At Sadie's sixth birthday party, the last one we'd shared as a family, Sadie and I had a huge argument. I don't remember what it was about. I think I wanted to blow out the candles for her. We started yelling. She grabbed my shirt. I pushed her. I remember Dad rushing toward us, trying to intervene, but before he could, Sadie's birthday cake exploded. Icing splattered the walls, our parents, the faces of Sadie's little six-year-old friends. Dad and Mom separated us. They sent me to my room. Later, they said we must've hit the cake by accident as we were fighting, but I knew we hadn't. Something much weirder had made it explode, as if it had responded to our anger. I remembered Sadie crying with a chunk of cake on her forehead, an upside-down candle stuck to the ceiling with its wick still burning, and an adult visitor, one of my parents' friends, his glasses speckled with white frosting.

I turned to Amos. "That was you. You were at Sadie's party."

"Vanilla icing," he recalled. "Very tasty. But it was clear even then that you two would be difficult to raise in the same household."

"And so…" I faltered. "What happens to us now?"

I didn't want to admit it, but I couldn't stand the thought of being separated from Sadie again.

She wasn't much, but she was all I had.

"You must be trained properly," Amos said, "whether the House approves or not."

"Why wouldn't they approve?" I asked.

"I will explain everything, don't worry. But we must start your lessons if we are to stand any chance of finding your father and putting things right. Otherwise the entire world is in danger. If we only knew where—"

"Phoenix," I blurted out.

Amos stared at me. "What?"

"Last night I had…well, not a dream, exactly…" I felt stupid, but I told him what had happened while I slept.

Judging from Amos's expression, the news was even worse than I thought.

"You're *sure* he said 'birthday present'?" he asked.

"Yeah, but what does that mean?"

"And a permanent host," Amos said. "He didn't have one yet?"

"Well, that's what the rooster-footed guy said—"

"That was a demon," Amos said. "A minion of chaos. And if demons are coming through to the mortal world, we don't have much time. This is bad, very bad."

"If you live in Phoenix," I said.

"Carter, our enemy won't stop in Phoenix. If he's grown so powerful so fast… What did he say about the storm, exactly?"

"He said: 'I will summon the greatest storm ever known.'"

Amos scowled. "The last time he said that, he created the Sahara. A storm that large could destroy North America, generating enough chaos energy to give him an almost invincible form."

"What are you talking about? Who *is* this guy?"

Amos waved away the question. "More important right now: why didn't you sleep with the headrest?"

I shrugged. "It was uncomfortable." I looked at Sadie for support. "You didn't use it, did you?"

Sadie rolled her eyes. "Well, of course I did. It was *obviously* there for a reason."

Sometimes I really hate my sister. [Ow! That's my foot!]

"Carter," Amos said, "sleep is dangerous. It's a doorway into the Duat."

"Lovely," Sadie grumbled. "Another strange word."

"Ah…yes, sorry," Amos said. "The Duat is the world of spirits and magic. It exists beneath the waking world like a vast ocean, with many layers and regions. We submerged just under its surface last night to reach New York, because travel through the Duat is much faster. Carter, your consciousness also passed through its shallowest currents as you slept, which is how you witnessed what happened in Phoenix. Fortunately, you survived that experience. But the deeper you go into the Duat, the more horrible things you encounter, and the more difficult it is to return. There are entire realms filled with demons, palaces where the gods exist in their pure forms, so powerful their mere presence would burn a human to ashes. There are prisons that hold beings of unspeakable evil, and some chasms so deep and chaotic that not even the gods dare explore them. Now that your powers are

stirring, you must not sleep without protection, or you leave yourself open to attacks from the Duat or…unintended journeys through it. The headrest is enchanted, to keep your consciousness anchored to your body."

"You mean I actually *did*…" My mouth tasted like metal. "Could he have killed me?"

Amos's expression was grave. "The fact that your soul can travel like that means you are progressing faster than I thought. Faster than should be possible. If the Red Lord had noticed you—"

"The Red Lord?" Sadie said. "That's the fiery bloke?"

Amos rose. "I must find out more. We can't simply wait for him to find you. And if he releases the storm on his birthday, at the height of his powers—"

"You mean you're going to Phoenix?" I could barely get the words out. "Amos, that fiery man defeated Dad like his magic was a joke! Now he's got demons, and he's getting stronger, and—you'll be killed!"

Amos gave me a dry smile, like he'd already weighed the dangers and didn't need a reminder. His expression reminded me painfully of Dad's. "Don't count your uncle out so quickly, Carter. I've got some magic of my own. Besides, I must see what is happening for myself if we're to have any chance at saving your father and stopping the Red Lord. I'll be quick and careful. Just stay here. Muffin will guard you."

I blinked. "The cat will guard us? You can't just leave us here! What about our training?"

"When I return," Amos promised. "Don't worry, the mansion is protected. Just do not leave. Do not be tricked into opening the door for anyone. And whatever happens, *do not* go into the library. I absolutely forbid it. I will be back by sunset."

Before we could protest, Amos walked calmly to the edge of the terrace and jumped.

"No!" Sadie screamed. We ran to the railing and looked over. Below was a hundred-foot drop into the East River. There was no sign of Amos. He'd simply vanished.

Philip of Macedonia splashed in his pool. Muffin jumped onto the railing and insisted we pet her.

We were alone in a strange mansion with a baboon, a crocodile, and a weird cat. And apparently, the entire world was in danger.

I looked at Sadie. "What do we do now?"

She crossed her arms. "Well, that's obvious, isn't it? We explore the library."

SADIE

7. I Drop a Little Man on His Head

HONESTLY, CARTER IS SO THICK sometimes I can't believe we're related.

I mean when someone says *I forbid it,* that's a good sign it's worth doing. I made for the library straightaway.

"Hold on!" Carter cried. "You can't just—"

"Brother dear," I said, "did your soul leave your body again while Amos was talking, or did you actually *hear* him? Egyptian gods *real*. Red Lord *bad*. Red Lord's birthday: very soon, very bad. House of Life: fussy old magicians who hate our family because Dad was a bit of a rebel, whom by the way you could take a lesson from. Which leaves us—*just* us—with Dad missing, an evil god about to destroy the world, and an uncle who just jumped off the building—and I *can't* actually blame him." I took a breath. [Yes, Carter, I do have to breathe occasionally.] "Am I missing anything? Oh, yes, I also have a brother who is supposedly quite powerful from an ancient bloodline, blah, blah, et cetera, but is too afraid to visit a library. Now, coming or not?"

Carter blinked as if I'd just hit him, which I suppose I had in a way.

"I just…" He faltered. "I just think we should be careful."

I realized the poor boy was quite scared, which I couldn't hold against him, but it did startle me. Carter was my *big* brother, after all—older, more sophisticated, the one who traveled the world with Dad. Big brothers are the ones who are supposed to pull their punches. Little sisters—well, we should be able to hit as hard as we like, shouldn't we? But I realized that possibly, just possibly, I'd been a bit harsh with him.

"Look," I said. "We need to help Dad, yes? There's got to be some powerful stuff in that library, otherwise Amos wouldn't keep it locked up. You do want to help Dad?"

Carter shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah…of course."

Well, that was one problem sorted, so we headed for the library. But as soon as Khufu saw what we were up to, he scrambled off the sofa with his basketball and jumped in front of the library doors. Who knew baboons were so speedy? He barked at us, and I have to say baboons have *enormous* fangs. And they're not any prettier when they've been chewing up exotic pink birds.

Carter tried to reason with him. "Khufu, we're not going to steal anything. We just want—"

"Agh!" Khufu dribbled his basketball angrily.

"Carter," I said, "you're not helping. Look here, Khufu. I have…ta-da!" I held up a little yellow box of cereal I'd taken from the buffet table. "Cheerios! Ends with an *-o*. Yumsies!"

"Aghhh!" Khufu grunted, more excited now than angry.

"Want it?" I coaxed. "Just take it to the couch and pretend you didn't see us, yes?"

I threw the cereal towards the couch, and the baboon lunged after it. He grabbed the box in midair and was so excited, he ran straight up the wall and sat on the fireplace mantel, where he began gingerly picking out Cheerios and eating them one at a time.

Carter looked at me with grudging admiration. "How did you—"

"Some of us think ahead. Now, let's open these doors."

That was not so easily done. They were made of thick wood laced with giant steel chains and padlocked. *Complete* overkill.

Carter stepped forward. He tried to raise the doors by lifting his hand, which had been quite impressive the night before, only now accomplished nothing.

He shook the chains the old-fashioned way, then yanked on the padlocks.

"No good," he said.

Ice needles tingled on the back of my neck. It was almost as if someone—or something—was whispering an idea in my head. "What was that word Amos used at breakfast with the saucer?"

"For 'join'?" Carter said. "*Hi-nehm* or something."

"No, the other one, for 'destroy'."

"Uh, *ha-di*. But you'd need to know magic and the hieroglyphics, wouldn't you? And even then —"

I raised my hand toward the door. I pointed with two fingers and my thumb—an odd gesture I'd never made before, like a make-believe gun except with the thumb parallel to the ground.

"Ha-di!"

Bright gold hieroglyphs burned against the largest padlock.

And the doors exploded. Carter hit the floor as chains shattered and splinters flew all over the Great Room. When the dust cleared, Carter got up, covered in wood shavings. I seemed to be fine. Muffin circled my feet, mewing contentedly, as if this were all very normal.

Carter stared at me. "How exactly—"

"Don't know," I admitted. "But the library's open."

"Think you overdid it a little? We're going to be in so much trouble—"

"We'll just figure out a way to zap the door back, won't we?"

"No more zapping, please," Carter said. "That explosion could've killed us."

"Oh, do you think if you tried that spell on a person—"

"No!" He stepped back nervously.

I felt gratified that I could make him squirm, but I tried not to smile. "Let's just explore the library, shall we?"

The truth was, I couldn't have *ha-di*-ed anyone. As soon as I stepped forward, I felt so faint that I almost collapsed.

Carter caught me as I stumbled. "You okay?"

"Fine," I managed, though I didn't feel fine. "I'm tired"—my stomach rumbled—"and famished."

"You just ate a huge breakfast."

It was true, but I felt as if I hadn't had food in weeks.

"Never mind," I told him. "I'll manage."

Carter studied me skeptically. "Those hieroglyphs you created were golden. Dad and Amos both used blue. Why?"

"Maybe everyone has his own color," I suggested. "Maybe you'll get hot pink."

"Very funny."

"Come on, pink wizard," I said. "Inside we go."

The library was so amazing, I almost forgot my dizziness. It was bigger than I'd imagined, a round chamber sunk deep into solid rock, like a giant well. This didn't make sense, as the mansion was sitting on top of a warehouse, but then again nothing else about the place was exactly normal.

From the platform where we stood, a staircase descended three stories to the bottom floor. The walls, floor, and domed ceiling were all decorated with multicolored pictures of people, gods, and monsters. I'd seen such illustrations in Dad's books (yes, all right, sometimes when I was in the Piccadilly bookshop I'd wander into the Egypt section and sneak a look at Dad's books, just to feel some connection to him, not because I wanted to read them) but the pictures in the books had always been faded and smudged. These in the library looked newly painted, making the entire room a work of art.

"It's beautiful," I said.

A blue starry sky glittered on the ceiling, but it wasn't a solid field of blue. Rather, the sky was painted in a strange swirling pattern. I realized it was shaped like a woman. She lay curled on her side—her body, arms, and legs dark blue and dotted with stars. Below, the library floor was done in a similar way, the green-and-brown earth shaped into a man's body, dotted with forests and hills and cities. A river snaked across his chest.

The library had no books. Not even bookshelves. Instead, the walls were honeycombed with round cubbyholes, each one holding a sort of plastic cylinder.

At each of the four compass points, a ceramic statue stood on a pedestal. The statues were half-size humans wearing kilts and sandals, with glossy black wedge-shaped haircuts and black eyeliner around their eyes.

[Carter says the eyeliner stuff is called kohl, as if it matters.]

At any rate, one statue held a stylus and scroll. Another held a box. Another held a short, hooked staff. The last was empty-handed.

"Sadie." Carter pointed to the center of the room. Sitting on a long stone table was Dad's workbag.

Carter started down the stairs, but I grabbed his arm. "Hang on. What about traps?"

He frowned. "Traps?"

"Didn't Egyptian tombs have traps?"

"Well…sometimes. But this isn't a tomb. Besides, more often they had curses, like the burning curse, the donkey curse—"

"Oh, lovely. That sounds so much better."

He trotted down the steps, which made me feel quite ridiculous, as I'm usually the one to forge ahead. But I supposed if someone had to get cursed with a burning skin rash or attacked by a magical donkey, it was better Carter than me.

We made it to the middle of the room with no excitement. Carter opened the bag. Still no traps or curses. He brought out the strange box Dad had used in the British Museum.

It was made of wood, and about the right size to hold a loaf of French bread. The lid was decorated much like the library, with gods and monsters and sideways-walking people.

"How did the Egyptians move like that?" I wondered. "All sideways with their arms and legs out. It seems quite silly."

Carter gave me one of his *God, you're stupid* looks. "They didn't walk like that in real life, Sadie."

"Well, why are they painted like that, then?"

"They thought paintings were like magic. If you painted yourself, you had to show all your arms and legs. Otherwise, in the afterlife you might be reborn without all your pieces."

"Then why the sideways faces? They never look straight at you. Doesn't that mean they'll lose the other side of their face?"

Carter hesitated. "I think they were afraid the picture would be *too* human if it was looking right at you. It might try to *become* you."

"So is there anything they *weren't* afraid of?"

"Little sisters," Carter said. "If they talked too much, the Egyptians threw them to the crocodiles."

He had me for a second. I wasn't used to him displaying a sense of humor. Then I punched him. "Just open the bloody box."

The first thing he pulled out was a lump of white gunk.

"Wax," Carter pronounced.

"Fascinating." I picked up a wooden stylus and a palette with small indentations in its surface for ink, then a few glass jars of the ink itself—black, red, and gold. "And a prehistoric painting set."

Carter pulled out several lengths of brown twine, a small ebony cat statue, and a thick roll of paper. No, not paper. Papyrus. I remembered Dad explaining how the Egyptians made it from a river plant because they never invented paper. The stuff was so thick and rough, it made me wonder if the poor Egyptians had had to use toilet papyrus. If so, no wonder they walked sideways.

Finally I pulled out a wax figurine.

"Ew," I said.

He was a tiny man, crudely fashioned, as if the maker had been in a hurry. His arms were crossed over his chest, his mouth was open, and his legs were cut off at the knees. A lock of human hair was wrapped round his waist.

Muffin jumped on the table and sniffed the little man. She seemed to think him quite interesting.

"There's nothing here," Carter said.

"What do you want?" I asked. "We've got wax, some toilet papyrus, an ugly statue—"

"Something to explain what happened to Dad. How do we get him back? Who was that fiery man he summoned?"

I held up the wax man. "You heard him, warty little troll. Tell us what you know."

I was just messing about. But the wax man became soft and warm like flesh. He said, "I answer the call."

I screamed and dropped him on his tiny head. Well, can you blame me?

"Ow!" he said.

Muffin came over to have a sniff, and the little man started cursing in another language, possibly Ancient Egyptian. When that didn't work, he screeched in English: "Go away! I'm not a mouse!"

I scooped up Muffin and put her on the floor.

Carter's face had gone as soft and waxy as the little man's. "What *are* you?" he asked.

"I'm a *shabti,* of course!" The figurine rubbed his dented head. He still looked quite lumpish, only now he was a living lump. "Master calls me Doughboy, though I find the name insulting. You may call me Supreme-Force-Who-Crushes-His-Enemies!"

"All right, Doughboy," I said.

He scowled at me, I think, though it was hard to tell with his mashed-up face.

"You weren't supposed to trigger me! Only the master does that."

"The master, meaning Dad," I guessed. "*Er,* Julius Kane?"

"That's him," Doughboy grumbled. "Are we done yet? Have I fulfilled my service?"

Carter stared at me blankly, but I thought I was beginning to understand.

"So, Doughboy," I told the lump. "You were triggered when I picked you up and gave you a direct order: *Tell us what you know.* Is that correct?"

Doughboy crossed his stubby arms. "You're just toying with me now. *Of course* that's correct. Only the master is supposed to be able to trigger me, by the way. I don't know how you did it, but he'll blast you to pieces when he finds out."

Carter cleared his throat. "Doughboy, the master is our dad, and he's missing. He's been magically sent away somehow and we need your help—"

"Master is gone?" Doughboy smiled so widely, I thought his wax face would split open. "Free at last! See you, suckers!"

He lunged for the end of the table but forgot he had no feet. He landed on his face, then began crawling toward the edge, dragging himself with his hands. "Free! Free!"

He fell off the table and onto the floor with a thud, but that didn't seem to discourage him. "Free! Free!"

He made it another centimeter or two before I picked him up and threw him in Dad's magic box. Doughboy tried to get out, but the box was just tall enough that he couldn't reach the rim. I wondered if it had been designed that way.

"Trapped!" he wailed. "Trapped!"

"Oh, shut up," I told him. "*I'm* the mistress now. And you'll answer my questions."

Carter raised his eyebrow. "How come *you* get to be in charge?"

"Because I was smart enough to activate him."

"You were just joking around!"

I ignored my brother, which is one of my many talents. "Now, Doughboy, first off, what's a *shabti*?"

"Will you let me out of the box if I tell you?"

"You *have* to tell me," I pointed out. "And no, I won't."

He sighed. *"Shabti* means *answerer,* as even the stupidest slave could tell you."

Carter snapped his fingers. "I remember now! The Egyptians made models out of wax or clay—servants to do every kind of job they could imagine in the afterlife. They were supposed to come to life when their master called, so the deceased person could, like, kick back and relax and let the *shabti* do all his work for eternity."

"First," Doughboy snipped, "that is typical of humans! Lazing around while we do all the work. Second, afterlife work is only *one* function of *shabti*. We are also used by magicians for a great number of things in *this* life, because magicians would be total incompetents without us. Third, if you know so much, why are you asking me?"

"Why did Dad cut off your legs," I wondered, "and leave you with a mouth?"

"I—" Doughboy clapped his little hands over his mouth. "Oh, very funny. Threaten the wax statue. Big bully! He cut my legs off so I wouldn't run away or come to life in perfect form and try to kill him, naturally. Magicians are very mean. They maim statues to control them. They are afraid of us!"

"Would you come to life and try to kill him, had he made you perfectly?"

"Probably," Doughboy admitted. "Are we done?"

"Not by half," I said. "What happened to our dad?"

Doughboy shrugged. "How should I know? But I see his wand and staff aren't in the box."

"No," Carter said. "The staff—the thing that turned into a snake—it got incinerated. And the wand…is that the *boomerang thing*?"

"The boomerang thing?" Doughboy said. "Gods of Eternal Egypt, you're dense. Of course that's his wand."

"It got shattered," I said.

"Tell me how," Doughboy demanded.

Carter told him the story. I wasn't sure that was the best idea, but I supposed a ten-centimeter-tall statue couldn't do us *that* much harm.

"This is wonderful!" Doughboy cried.

"Why?" I asked. "Is Dad still alive?"

"No!" Doughboy said. "He's almost certainly dead. The five gods of the Demon Days released? Wonderful! And anyone who duels with the Red Lord—"

"Wait," I said. "I order you to tell me what happened."

"Ha!" Doughboy said. "I only have to tell you what I *know.* Making educated guesses is a completely different task. I declare my service fulfilled!"

With that, he turned back to lifeless wax.

"Wait!" I picked him up again and shook him. "Tell me your educated guesses!"

Nothing happened.

"Maybe he's got a timer," Carter said. "Like only once a day. Or maybe you broke him."

"Carter, make a *helpful* suggestion! What do we do now?"

He looked at the four ceramic statues on their pedestals. "Maybe—"

"Other *shabti?"*

"Worth a shot."

If the statues were *answerers,* they weren't very good at it. We tried holding them while giving them orders, though they were quite heavy. We tried pointing at them and shouting. We tried asking nicely. They gave us no answers at all.

I grew so frustrated I wanted to *ha-di* them into a million pieces, but I was still so hungry and tired, I had the feeling that spell would not be good for my health.

Finally we decided to check the cubbyholes round the walls. The plastic cylinders were the kind you might find at a drive-through bank—the kind that shoot up and down the pneumatic tubes. Inside each case was a papyrus scroll. Some looked new. Some looked thousands of years old. Each canister was labeled in hieroglyphs and (fortunately) in English.

"The Book of the Heavenly Cow," Carter read on one. "What kind of name is that? What've you got, *The Heavenly Badger*?"

"No," I said. *"The Book of Slaying Apophis."*

Muffin meowed in the corner. When I looked over, her tail was puffed up.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"Apophis was a giant snake monster," Carter muttered. "He was bad news."

Muffin turned and raced up the stairs, back into the Great Room. Cats. No accounting for them.

Carter opened another scroll. "Sadie, look at this."

He'd found a papyrus that was quite long, and most of the text on it seemed to be lines of hieroglyphs.

"Can you read any of this?" Carter asked.

I frowned at the writing, and the odd thing was, I *couldn't* read it—except for one line at the top. "Only that bit where the title should be. It says…*Blood of the Great House.* What does that mean?"

"Great house," Carter mused. "What do the words sound like in Egyptian?"

"Per-roh. Oh, it's *pharaoh,* isn't it? But I thought a pharaoh was a king?"

"It is," Carter said. "The word literally means 'great house,' like the king's mansion. Sort of like referring to the president as 'the White House.' So here it probably means more like *Blood of the Pharaohs,* all of them, the whole lineage of all the dynasties, not just one guy."

"So why do I care about the pharaohs' blood, and why can't I read any of the rest?"

Carter stared at the lines. Suddenly his eyes widened. "They're names. Look, they're all written inside cartouches."

"Excuse me?" I asked, because *cartouche* sounded like a rather rude word, and I pride myself on knowing those.

"The circles," Carter explained. "They symbolize magic ropes. They're supposed to protect the holder of the name from evil magic." He eyed me. "And possibly also from other magicians reading their names."

"Oh, you're mental," I said. But I looked at the lines, and saw what he meant. All the other words were protected by cartouches, and I couldn't make sense of them.

"Sadie," Carter said, his voice urgent. He pointed to a cartouche at the very end of the list—the last entry in what looked to be a catalogue of thousands.

Inside the circle were two simple symbols, a basket and a wave.

"KN," Carter announced. "I know this one. It's our name, KANE."

"Missing a few letters, isn't it?"

Carter shook his head. "Egyptians usually didn't write vowels. Only consonants. You have to figure out the vowel sounds from context."

"They really *were* nutters. So that could be KON or IKON or KNEE or AKNE."

"It could be," Carter agreed. "But it's our name, Kane. I asked Dad to write it for me in hieroglyphs once, and that's how he did it. But why are we in this list? And what is 'blood of the pharaohs'?"

That icy tingle started on the back of my neck. I remembered what Amos had said, about both sides of our family being very ancient. Carter's eyes met mine, and judging from his expression, he was having the same thought.

"There's no way," I protested.

"Must be some kind of joke," he agreed. "Nobody keeps family records that far back."

I swallowed, my throat suddenly very dry. So many odd things had happened to us in the last day, but it was only when I saw our name in that book that I finally began to believe all this mad Egyptian stuff was real. Gods, magicians, monsters…and our family was tied into it.

Ever since breakfast, when it occurred to me that Dad had been trying to bring Mum back from the dead, a horrible emotion had been trying to take hold of me. And it wasn't dread. Yes, the whole idea was creepy, *much* creepier than the shrine my grandparents kept in the hall cupboard to my dead mother. And yes, I told you I try not to live in the past and nothing could change the fact that my mum was gone. But I'm a liar. The truth was, I'd had one dream ever since I was six: to see my mum again. To actually get to know her, talk to her, go shopping, do *anything*. Just be with her once so I could have a better memory to hold on to. The feeling I was trying to shake was *hope*. I knew I was setting myself up for colossal hurt. But if it really *were* possible to bring her back, then I would've blown up any number of Rosetta Stones to make it happen.

"Let's keep looking," I said.

After a few more minutes, I found a picture of some of animal-headed gods, five in a row, with a starry woman figure arching over them protectively like an umbrella. Dad had released five gods. *Hmm.*

"Carter," I called. "What's this, then?"

He came to have a look and his eyes lit up.

"That's it!" he announced. "These five…and up here, their mother, Nut."

I laughed. "A goddess named Nut? Is her last name Case?"

"Very funny," Carter said. "She was the goddess of the sky."

He pointed to the painted ceiling—the lady with the blue star-spangled skin, same as in the scroll.

"So what about her?" I asked.

Carter knit his eyebrows. "Something about the Demon Days. It had to do with the birth of these five gods, but it's been a long time since Dad told me the story. This whole scroll is written in hieratic, I think. That's like hieroglyph cursive. Can you read it?"

I shook my head. Apparently, my particular brand of insanity only applied to regular hieroglyphs.

"I wish I could find the story in English," Carter said.

Just then there was a cracking noise behind us. The empty-handed clay statue hopped off his pedestal and marched towards us. Carter and I scrambled to get out of his way, but he walked straight past us, grabbed a cylinder from its cubbyhole and brought it to Carter.

"It's a retrieval *shabti*," I said. "A clay librarian!"

Carter swallowed nervously and took the cylinder. "*Um*…thanks."

The statue marched back to his pedestal, jumped on, and hardened again into regular clay.

"I wonder…" I faced the *shabti*. "Sandwich and chips, please!"

Sadly, none of the statues jumped down to serve me. Perhaps food wasn't allowed in the library.

Carter uncapped the cylinder and unrolled the papyrus. He sighed with relief. "This version is in English."

As he scanned the text, his frown got deeper.

"You don't look happy," I noticed.

"Because I remember the story now. The five gods…if Dad really released them, it isn't good news."

"Hang on," I said. "Start from the beginning."

Carter took a shaky breath. "Okay. So the sky goddess, Nut, was married to the earth god, Geb."

"That would be this chap on the floor?" I tapped my foot on the big green man with the river and hills and forests all over his body.

"Right," Carter said. "Anyway, Geb and Nut wanted to have kids, but the king of the gods, Ra—he was the sun god—heard this bad prophecy that a child of Nut—"

"Child of Nut," I snickered. "Sorry, go on."

"—a child of Geb and Nut would one day replace Ra as king. So when Ra learned that Nut was

pregnant, Ra freaked out. He forbade Nut to give birth to her children on any day or night of the year."

I crossed my arms. "So what, she had to stay pregnant forever? That's awfully mean."

Carter shook his head. "Nut figured out a way. She set up a game of dice with the moon god, Khons. Every time Khons lost, he had to give Nut some of his moonlight. He lost so many times, Nut won enough moonlight to create five *new* days and tag them on to the end of the year."

"Oh, please," I said. "First, how can you gamble moonlight? And if you did, how could you make extra days out of it?"

"It's a story!" Carter protested. "Anyway, the Egyptian calendar had three hundred and sixty days in the year, just like the three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle. Nut created five days and added them to the end of the year—days that were not part of the regular year."

"The Demon Days," I guessed. "So the myth explains why a year has three hundred and sixty-five days. And I suppose she had her children—"

"During those five days," Carter agreed. "One kid per day."

"Again, how do you have five children in a row, each on a different day?"

"They're gods," Carter said. "They can do stuff like that."

"Makes as much sense as the name Nut. But please, go on."

"So when Ra found out, he was furious, but it was too late. The children were already born. Their names were Osiris—"

"The one Dad was after."

"Then Horus, Set, Isis, and, um…" Carter consulted his scroll. "Nephthys. I always forget that one."

"And the fiery man in the museum said, *you have released all five.*"

"Exactly. What if they were imprisoned together and Dad didn't realize it? They were born together, so maybe they had to be summoned back into the world together. The thing is, one of these guys, Set, was a really bad dude. Like, the villain of Egyptian mythology. The god of evil and chaos and desert storms."

I shivered. "Did he perhaps have something to do with fire?"

Carter pointed to one of the figures in the picture. The god had an animal head, but I couldn't quite make out which sort of animal: Dog? Anteater? Evil bunny rabbit? Whichever it was, his hair and his clothes were bright red.

"The Red Lord," I said.

"Sadie, there's more," Carter said. "Those five days—the Demon Days—were bad luck in Ancient Egypt. You had to be careful, wear good luck charms, and not do anything important or dangerous on those days. And in the British Museum, Dad told Set: *They'll stop you before the Demon Days are over.*"

"Surely you don't think he meant *us,*" I said. "*We're* supposed to stop this Set character?"

Carter nodded. "And if the last five days of *our* calendar year still count as the Egyptian Demon Days—they'd start on December 27, the day after tomorrow."

The *shabti* seemed to be staring at me expectantly, but I had not the slightest idea what to do. Demon Days and evil bunny gods—if I heard *one* more impossible thing, my head would explode.

And the worst of it? The little insistent voice in the back of my head saying: *It's not impossible. To save Dad, we must defeat Set.*

As if that had been on my to-do list for Christmas hols. See Dad—check. Develop strange powers—check. Defeat an evil god of chaos—check. The whole idea was mad!

Suddenly there was a loud crash, as if something had broken in the Great Room. Khufu began barking in alarm.

Carter and I locked eyes. Then we ran for the stairs.

SADIE

8. Muffin Plays with Knives

OUR BABOON WAS GOING completely sky goddess—which is to say, *nuts*.

He swung from column to column, bouncing along the balconies, overturning pots and statues. Then he ran back to the terrace windows, stared outside for a moment, and proceeded to go berserk again.

Muffin was also at the window. She crouched on all fours with her tail twitching as if she were stalking a bird.

"Perhaps it's just a passing flamingo," I suggested hopefully, but I'm not sure Carter could hear me over the screaming baboon.

We ran to the glass doors. At first I didn't see any problem. Then water exploded from the pool, and my heart nearly jumped out of my chest. Two enormous creatures, most definitely not flamingos, were thrashing about with our crocodile, Philip of Macedonia.

I couldn't make out what they were, only that they were fighting Philip two against one. They disappeared under the boiling water, and Khufu ran screaming through the Great Room again, bonking himself on the head with his empty Cheerios box, which I must say was not particularly helpful.

"Longnecks," Carter said incredulously. "Sadie, did you *see* those things?"

I couldn't find an answer. Then one of the creatures was thrown out of the pool. It slammed into the doors right in front of us, and I jumped back in alarm. On the other side of the glass was the most terrifying animal I'd ever seen. Its body was like a leopard's—lean and sinewy, with golden spotted fur—but its neck was completely wrong. It was green and scaly and at least as long as the rest of its body. It had a cat's head, but no normal cat's. When it turned its glowing red eyes towards us, it howled, showing a forked tongue and fangs dripping with green venom.

I realized my legs were shaking and I was making a very undignified whimpering sound.

The cat-serpent jumped back into the pool to join its companion in beating up Philip, who spun and snapped but seemed unable to hurt his attackers.

"We have to help Philip!" I cried. "He'll be killed!"

I reached for the door handle, but Muffin growled at me.

Carter said, "Sadie, no! You heard Amos. We can't open the doors for any reason. The house is protected by magic. Philip will have to beat them on his own."

"But what if he can't? Philip!"

The old crocodile turned. For a second his pink reptilian eye focused on me as if he could sense my concern. Then the cat-snakes bit at his underbelly and Philip rose up so that only the tip of his tail

still touched the water. His body began to glow. A low hum filled the air, like an airplane engine starting up. When Philip came down, he slammed into the terrace with all his might.

The entire house shook. Cracks appeared in the concrete terrace outside, and the swimming pool split right down the middle as the far end crumbled into empty space.

"No!" I cried.

But the edge of the terrace ripped free, plunging Philip and the monsters straight into the East River.

My whole body began to tremble. "He sacrificed himself. He killed the monsters."

"Sadie…" Carter's voice was faint. "What if he didn't? What if they come back?"

"Don't say that!"

"I—I recognized them, Sadie. Those creatures. Come on."

"Where?" I demanded, but he ran straight back to the library.

Carter marched up to the *shabti* who'd helped us before. "Bring me the…*gah,* what's it called?"

"What?" I asked.

"Something Dad showed me. It's a big stone plate or something. Had a picture of the first pharaoh, the guy who united Upper and Lower Egypt into one kingdom. His name…" His eyes lit up. "Narmer! Bring me the Narmer Plate!"

Nothing happened.

"No," Carter decided. "Not a plate. It was…one of those things that holds paint. A palette. Bring me the Narmer Palette!"

The empty-handed *shabti* didn't move, but across the room, the statue with the little hook came to life. He jumped off his pedestal and disappeared in a cloud of dust. A heartbeat later, he reappeared on the table. At his feet was a wedge of flat gray stone, shaped like a shield and about as long as my forearm.

"No!" Carter protested. "I meant a picture of it! Oh great, I think this is the *real* artifact. The *shabti* must've stolen it from the Cairo Museum. We've got to return—"

"Hang on," I said. "We might as well have a look."

The surface of the stone was carved with the picture of a man smashing another man in the face with what looked like a spoon.

"That's Narmer with the spoon," I guessed. "Angry because the other bloke stole his breakfast cereal?"

Carter shook his head. "He's conquering his enemies and uniting Egypt. See his hat? That's the crown of Lower Egypt, before the two countries united."

"The bit that looks like a bowling pin?"

"You're impossible," Carter grumbled.

"He looks like Dad, doesn't he?"

"Sadie, be serious!"

"I *am* serious. Look at his profile."

Carter decided to ignore me. He examined the stone like he was afraid to touch it. "I need to see the back but I don't want to turn it over. We might damage—"

I grabbed the stone and flipped it over.

"Sadie! You could've broken it!"

"That's what mend spells are for, yes?"

We examined the back of the stone, and I had to admit I was impressed by Carter's memory. Two cat-snake monsters stood in the center of the palette, their necks entwined. On either side, Egyptian men with ropes were trying to capture the creatures.

"They're called serpopards," Carter said. "Serpent leopards."

"Fascinating," I said. "But what *are* serpopards?"

"No one knows exactly. Dad thought they were creatures of chaos—very bad news, and they've been around forever. This stone is one of the oldest artifacts from Egypt. Those pictures were carved five thousand years ago."

"So why are five-thousand-year-old monsters attacking our house?"

"Last night, in Phoenix, the fiery man ordered his servants to capture us. He said to send the longnecks first."

I had a metallic taste in my mouth, and I wished I hadn't chewed my last piece of gum. "Well… good thing they're at the bottom of the East River."

Just then Khufu rushed into the library, screaming and slapping his head.

"Suppose I shouldn't have said that," I muttered.

Carter told the *shabti* to return the Narmer Palette, and both statue and stone disappeared. Then we followed the baboon upstairs.

The serpopards were back, their fur wet and slimy from the river, and they weren't happy. They prowled the broken ledge of the terrace, their snake necks whipping round as they sniffed the doors, looking for a way in. They spit poison that steamed and bubbled on the glass. Their forked tongues darted in and out.

"Agh, agh!" Khufu picked up Muffin, who was sitting on the sofa, and offered me the cat.

"I really don't think that will help," I told him.

"Agh!" Khufu insisted.

Neither *Muffin* nor *cat* ended in *-o,* so I guessed Khufu was not trying to offer me a snack, but I didn't know what he was on about. I took the cat just to shut him up.

"Mrow?" Muffin looked up at me.

"It'll be all right," I promised, trying not to sound scared out of my mind. "The house is protected by magic."

"Sadie," Carter said. "They've found something."

The serpopards had converged at the left-hand door and were intently sniffing the handle.

"Isn't it locked?" I asked.

Both monsters smashed their ugly faces against the glass. The door shuddered. Blue hieroglyphs glowed along the doorframe, but their light was faint.

"I don't like this," Carter murmured.

I prayed that the monsters would give up. Or that perhaps Philip of Macedonia would climb back to the terrace (do crocodiles climb?) and renew the fight.

Instead, the monsters smashed their heads against the glass again. This time a web of cracks appeared. The blue hieroglyphs flickered and died.

"AGH!" Khufu screamed. He waved his hand vaguely at the cat.

"Maybe if I try the *ha-di* spell," I said.

Carter shook his head. "You almost fainted after you blew up those doors. I don't want you passing out, or worse."

Carter once again surprised me. He tugged a strange sword from one of Amos's wall displays. The blade had an odd crescent-moon curve and looked horribly impractical.

"You can't be serious," I said.

"Unless—unless you've got a better idea," he stammered, his face beading with perspiration. "It's me, you, and the baboon against *those* things."

I'm sure Carter was trying to be brave in his own extremely unbrave way, but he was shaking worse than I was. If anyone was going to pass out, I feared it would be him, and I didn't fancy him doing that while holding a sharp object.

Then the serpopards struck a third time, and the door shattered. We backed up to the foot of Thoth's statue as the creatures stalked into the great room. Khufu threw his basketball, which bounced harmlessly off the first monster's head. Then he launched himself at the serpopard.

"Khufu, don't!" Carter yelled.

But the baboon sank his fangs into the monster's neck. The serpopard lashed around, trying to bite him. Khufu leaped off, but the monster was quick. It used its head like a bat and smacked poor Khufu in midair, sending him straight through the shattered door, over the broken terrace, and into the void.

I wanted to sob, but there wasn't time. The serpopards came toward us. We couldn't outrun them. Carter raised his sword. I pointed my hand at the first monster and tried to speak the *ha-di* spell, but my voice stuck in my throat.

"Mrow!" Muffin said, more insistently. Why was the cat still nestled in my arm and not running

away in terror?

Then I remembered something Amos had said: *Muffin will protect you.* Was that what Khufu had been trying to remind me? It seemed impossible, but I stammered, "M-muffin, I order you to protect us."

I tossed her on the floor. Just for a moment, the silver pendant on her collar seemed to gleam. Then the cat arched her back leisurely, sat down, and began licking a front paw. Well, really, what was I expecting—heroics?

The two red-eyed monsters bared their fangs. They raised their heads and prepared to strike—and an explosion of dry air blasted through the room. It was so powerful, it knocked Carter and me to the floor. The serpopards stumbled and backed away.

I staggered to my feet and realized that the center of the blast had been *Muffin*. My cat was no longer there. In her place was a woman—small and lithe like a gymnast. Her jet-black hair was tied in a ponytail. She wore a skintight leopard-skin jumpsuit and Muffin's pendant around her neck.

She turned and grinned at me, and her eyes were still Muffin's—yellow with black feline pupils. "About time," she chided.

The serpopards got over their shock and charged the cat woman. Their heads struck with lightning speed. They should've ripped her in two, but the cat lady leaped straight up, flipping three times, and landed above them, perched on the mantel.

She flexed her wrists, and two enormous knives shot from her sleeves into her hands. *"A-a-ah,* fun!"

The monsters charged. She launched herself between them, dancing and dodging with incredible grace, letting them lash at her futilely while she threaded their necks together. When she stepped away, the serpopards were hopelessly intertwined. The more they struggled, the tighter the knots became. They trampled back and forth, knocking over furniture and roaring in frustration.

"Poor things," the cat woman purred. "Let me help."

Her knives flashed, and the two monsters' heads thudded to the floor at her feet. Their bodies collapsed and dissolved into enormous piles of sand.

"So much for my playthings," the woman said sadly. "From sand they come, and to sand they return."

She turned towards us, and the knives shot back into her sleeves. "Carter, Sadie, we should leave. Worse will be coming."

Carter made a choking sound. "*Worse?* Who—how—what—"

"All in good time." The woman stretched her arms above her head with great satisfaction. "So good to be in human form again! Now, Sadie, can you open us a door through the Duat, please?"

I blinked. "Um…no. I mean—I don't know how."

The woman narrowed her eyes, clearly disappointed. "Shame. We'll need more power, then. An obelisk."

"But that's in London," I protested. "We can't—"

"There's a nearer one in Central Park. I try to avoid Manhattan, but this is an emergency. We'll just pop over and open a portal."

"A portal to where?" I demanded. "Who are you, and why are you my cat?"

The woman smiled. “For now, we just want a portal out of danger. As for my name, it’s *not* Muffin, thank you very much. It’s—”

“Bast,” Carter interrupted. “Your pendant—it’s the symbol of Bast, goddess of cats. I thought it was just decoration but…that’s you, isn’t it?”

“Very good, Carter,” Bast said. “Now come, while we can still make it out of here alive.”

9. We Run from Four Guys in Skirts

SO, YEAH. OUR CAT WAS A GODDESS.

What else is new?

She didn't give us much time to talk about it. She ordered me to the library to grab my dad's magic kit, and when I came back she was arguing with Sadie about Khufu and Philip.

"We have to search for them!" Sadie insisted.

"They'll be fine," said Bast. "However, *we* will not be, unless we leave now."

I raised my hand. "*Um,* excuse me, Miss Goddess Lady? Amos told us the house was—"

"Safe?" Bast snorted. "Carter, the defenses were too easily breached. Someone *sabotaged* them."

"What do you mean? Who—"

"Only a magician of the House could've done it."

"Another magician?" I asked. "Why would another magician want to sabotage Amos's house?"

"Oh, Carter," Bast sighed. "So young, so innocent. Magicians are devious creatures. Could be a million reasons why one would backstab another, but we don't have time to discuss it. Now, come on!"

She grabbed our arms and led us out the front door. She'd sheathed her knives, but she still had some wicked sharp claws for fingernails that hurt as they dug into my skin. As soon as we stepped outside, the cold wind stung my eyes. We climbed down a long flight of metal stairs into the industrial yard that surrounded the factory.

Dad's workbag was heavy on my shoulder. The curved sword I'd strapped across my back felt cold against my thin linen clothes. I'd started to sweat during the serpopard attack, and now my perspiration felt like it was turning to ice.

I looked around for more monsters, but the yard seemed abandoned. Old construction equipment lay in rusting heaps—a bulldozer, a crane with a wrecking ball, a couple of cement mixers. Piles of sheet metal and stacks of crates made a maze of obstacles between the house and the street a few hundred yards away.

We were about halfway across the yard when an old gray tomcat stepped in our path. One of his ears was torn. His left eye was swollen shut. Judging from his scars, he'd spent most of his life fighting.

Bast crouched and stared at the cat. He looked up at her calmly.

"Thank you," Bast said.

The old tomcat trotted off toward the river.

"What was that about?" Sadie asked.

"One of my subjects, offering help. He'll spread the news about our predicament. Soon every cat in New York will be on alert."

"He was so battered," Sadie said. "If he's your subject, couldn't you heal him?"

"And take away his marks of honor? A cat's battle scars are part of his identity. I couldn't—" Suddenly Bast tensed. She dragged us behind a stack of crates.

"What is it?" I whispered.

She flexed her wrists and her knives slid into her hands. She peeped over the top of the crates, every muscle in her body trembling. I tried to see what she was looking at, but there was nothing except the old wrecking-ball crane.

Bast's mouth twitched with excitement. Her eyes were fixed on the huge metal ball. I'd seen kittens look like that when they stalked catnip toy mice, or pieces of string, or rubber balls…. Balls? No. Bast was an ancient goddess. Surely she wouldn't—

"This could be it." She shifted her weight. "Stay very *very* still."

"There's no one there," Sadie hissed.

I started to say, "*Um*..."

Bast lunged over the crates. She flew thirty feet through the air, knives flashing, and landed on the wrecking ball with such force that she broke the chain. The cat goddess and the huge metal sphere smashed into the dirt and went rolling across the yard.

"Rowww!" Bast wailed. The wrecking ball rolled straight over her, but she didn't appear hurt. She leaped off and pounced again. Her knives sliced through the metal like wet clay. Within seconds, the wrecking ball was reduced to a mound of scraps.

Bast sheathed her blades. "Safe now!"

Sadie and I looked at each other.

"You saved us from a metal ball," Sadie said.

"You never know," Bast said. "It could've been hostile."

Just then a deep *boom!* shook the ground. I looked back at the mansion. Tendrils of blue fire curled from the top windows.

"Come on," Bast said. "Our time is up!"

I thought maybe she'd whisk us off by magic, or at least hail a taxi. Instead, Bast borrowed a silver Lexus convertible.

"Oh, yes," she purred. "I like this one! Come along, children."

"But this isn't yours," I pointed out.

"My dear, I'm a cat. Everything I *see* is mine." She touched the ignition and the keyhole sparked. The engine began to purr. [No, Sadie. Not like a cat, like an engine.]

"Bast," I said, "you can't just—"

Sadie elbowed me. "We'll work out how to return it later, Carter. Right now we've got an emergency."

She pointed back toward the mansion. Blue flames and smoke now billowed from every

window. But that wasn't the scary part—coming down the stairs were four men carrying a large box, like an oversize coffin with long handles sticking out at both ends. The box was covered with a black shroud and looked big enough for at least two bodies. The four men wore only kilts and sandals. Their coppery skin glinted in the sun as if made of metal.

"Oh, that's bad," Bast said. "In the car, please."

I decided not to ask questions. Sadie beat me to the shotgun seat so I climbed in back. The four metallic guys with the box were racing across the yard, coming straight for us at an unbelievable speed. Before I even had my seat belt on, Bast hit the gas.

We tore through the streets of Brooklyn, weaving insanely through traffic, riding over sidewalks, narrowly missing pedestrians.

Bast drove with reflexes that were…well, catlike. Any human trying to drive so fast would've had a dozen wrecks, but she got us safely onto the Williamsburg Bridge.

I thought for sure we must've lost our pursuers, but when I looked back, the four copper men with the black box were weaving in and out of traffic. They appeared to be jogging at a normal pace, but they passed cars that were doing fifty. Their bodies blurred like choppy images in an old movie, as if they were out of sync with the regular stream of time.

"What *are* they?" I asked. "*Shabti*?"

"No, carriers." Bast glanced in the rearview mirror. "Summoned straight from the Duat. They'll stop at nothing to find their victims, throw them in the sedan—"

"The what?" Sadie interrupted.

"The large box," Bast said. "It's a kind of carriage. The carriers capture you, beat you senseless, throw you in, and carry you back to their master. They never lose their prey, and they never give up."

"But what do they want us for?"

"Trust me," Bast growled, "you don't want to know."

I thought about the fiery man last night in Phoenix—how he'd fried one of his servants into a grease spot. I was pretty sure I didn't want to meet him face-to-face again.

"Bast," I said, "if you're a goddess, can't you just snap your fingers and disintegrate those guys? Or wave your hand and teleport us away?"

"Wouldn't that be nice? But my power in this host is limited."

"You mean Muffin?" Sadie asked. "But you're not a cat anymore."

"She's still my host, Sadie, my anchor on this side of the Duat—and a very imperfect one. Your call for help allowed me to assume human shape, but that alone takes a great deal of power. Besides, even when I'm in a *powerful* host, Set's magic is stronger than mine."

"Could you please say something I actually understand?" I pleaded.

"Carter, we don't have time for a full discussion on gods and hosts and the limits of magic! We have to get you to safety."

Bast floored the accelerator and shot up the middle of the bridge. The four carriers with the sedan raced after us, blurring the air as they moved, but no cars swerved to avoid them. No one panicked or even looked at them.

"How can people not see them?" I said. "Don't they notice four copper men in skirts running up the bridge with a weird black box?"

Bast shrugged. “Cats can hear many sounds you can’t. Some animals see things in the ultraviolet spectrum that are invisible to humans. Magic is similar. Did you notice the mansion when you first arrived?”

“Well…no.”

“And you are born to magic,” Bast said. “Imagine how hard it would be for a regular mortal.”

“Born to magic?” I remembered what Amos had said about our family being in the House of Life for a long time. “If magic, like, runs in the family, why haven’t I ever been able to do it before?”

Bast smiled in the mirror. “Your sister understands.”

Sadie’s ears turned red. “No, I don’t! I still can’t believe you’re a *goddess*. All these years, you’ve been eating crunchy treats, sleeping on my head—”

“I made a deal with your father,” Bast said. “He let me remain in the world as long as I assumed a minor form, a normal housecat, so I could protect and watch over you. It was the least I could do after—” She stopped abruptly.

A horrible thought occurred to me. My stomach fluttered, and it had nothing to do with how fast we were going. “After our mom’s death?” I guessed.

Bast stared straight ahead out the windshield.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” I said. “Dad and Mom did some kind of magic ritual at Cleopatra’s Needle. Something went wrong. Our mom died and…and they released you?”

“That’s not important right now,” Bast said. “The point is I agreed to look after Sadie. And I will.”

She was hiding something. I was sure of it, but her tone made it clear that the subject was closed.

“If you gods are so powerful and helpful,” I said, “why does the House of Life forbid magicians from summoning you?”

Bast swerved into the fast lane. “Magicians are paranoid. Your best hope is to stay with me. We’ll get as far away as possible from New York. Then we’ll get help and challenge Set.”

“What help?” Sadie asked.

Bast raised an eyebrow. “Why, we’ll summon more gods, of course.”

10. Bast Goes Green

[Sadie, stop it! Yeah, I'm getting to that part.] Sorry, she keeps trying to distract me by setting fire to my—never mind. Where was I?

We barreled off the Williamsburg Bridge into Manhattan and headed north on Clinton Street.

"They're still following," Sadie warned.

Sure enough, the carriers were only a block behind us, weaving around cars and trampling over sidewalk displays of tourist junk.

"We'll buy some time." Bast growled deep in her throat—a sound so low and powerful it made my teeth buzz. She yanked the wheel and swerved right onto East Houston.

I looked back. Just as the carriers turned the corner, a horde of cats materialized all around them. Some jumped from windows. Some ran from the sidewalks and alleys. Some crawled from the storm drains. All of them converged on the carriers in a wave of fur and claws—climbing up their copper legs, scratching their backs, clinging to their faces, and weighing down the sedan box. The carriers stumbled, dropping the box. They began blindly swatting at the cats. Two cars swerved to avoid the animals and collided, blocking the entire street, and the carriers went down under the mass of angry felines. We turned onto the FDR Drive, and the scene disappeared from view.

"Nice," I admitted.

"It won't hold them long," Bast said. "Now—Central Park!"

Bast ditched the Lexus at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"We'll run from here," she said. "It's just behind the museum."

When she said run, she meant it. Sadie and I had to sprint to keep up, and Bast wasn't even breaking a sweat. She didn't stop for little things like hot dog stands or parked cars. Anything under ten feet tall she leaped over with ease, leaving us to scramble around the obstacles as best we could.

We ran into the park on the East Drive. As soon as we turned north, the obelisk loomed above us. A little over seventy feet tall, it looked like an exact copy of the needle in London. It was tucked away on a grassy hill, so it actually felt isolated, which is hard to achieve in the center of New York. There was no one around except a couple of joggers farther down the path. I could hear the traffic behind us on Fifth Avenue, but even that seemed far away.

We stopped at the obelisk's base. Bast sniffed the air as if smelling for trouble. Once I was standing still, I realized just how cold I was. The sun was directly overhead, but the wind ripped right through my borrowed linen clothes.

"I wish I'd grabbed something warmer," I muttered. "A wool coat would be nice."

"No, it wouldn't," Bast said, scanning the horizon. "You're dressed for magic."

Sadie shivered. "We have to freeze to be magical?"

"Magicians avoid animal products," Bast said absently. "Fur, leather, wool, any of that. The residual life aura can interfere with spells."

"My boots seem all right," Sadie noted.

"Leather," Bast said with distaste. "You may have a higher tolerance, so a bit of leather won't bother your magic. I don't know. But linen clothing is always best, or cotton—plant material. At any rate, Sadie, I think we're clear for the moment. There's a window of auspicious time starting right now, at eleven thirty, but it won't last long. Get started."

Sadie blinked. "Me? Why me? You're the goddess!"

"I'm not good at portals," Bast said. "Cats are protectors. Just control your emotions. Panic or fear will kill a spell. We *have* to get out of here before Set summons the other gods to his cause."

I frowned. "You mean Set's got, like, other evil gods on speed dial?"

Bast glanced nervously toward the trees. "Evil and good may not be the best way to think of it, Carter. As a magician, you must think about chaos and order. *Those* are the two forces that control the universe. Set is all about chaos."

"But what about the other gods Dad released?" I persisted. "Aren't they good guys? Isis, Osiris, Horus, Nephthys—where are they?"

Bast fixed her eyes on me. "That's a good question, Carter."

A Siamese cat broke through the bushes and ran up to Bast. They looked at each other for a moment. Then the Siamese dashed away.

"The carriers are close," Bast announced. "And something else…something much stronger, closing in from the east. I think the carriers' master has grown impatient."

My heart did a flip. "*Set* is coming?"

"No," Bast said. "Perhaps a minion. Or an ally. My cats are having trouble describing what they're seeing, and I *don't* want to find out. Sadie, now is the time. Just concentrate on opening a gateway to the Duat. I'll keep off the attackers. Combat magic is my specialty."

"Like what you did in the mansion?" I asked.

Bast showed her pointed teeth. "No, that was just combat."

The woods rustled, and the carriers emerged. Their sedan chair's shroud had been shredded by cat claws. The carriers themselves were scratched and dented. One walked with a limp, his leg bent backward at the knee. Another had a car fender wrapped around his neck.

The four metal men carefully set down their sedan chair. They looked at us and drew golden metal clubs from their belts.

"Sadie, get to work," Bast ordered. "Carter, you're welcome to help me."

The cat goddess unsheathed her knives. Her body began to glow with a green hue. An aura surrounded her, growing larger, like a bubble of energy, and lifting her off the ground. The aura took shape until Bast was encased in a holographic projection about four times her normal size. It was an image of the goddess in her ancient form—a twenty-foot-tall woman with the head of a cat. Floating in midair in the center of the hologram, Bast stepped forward. The giant cat goddess moved with her. It didn't seem possible that a see-through image could have substance, but its foot shook the ground.

Bast raised her hand. The glowing green warrior did the same, unsheathing claws as long and sharp as rapiers. Bast swiped the sidewalk in front of her and shredded the pavement to concrete ribbons. She turned and smiled at me. The giant cat's head did likewise, baring horrible fangs that could've bitten me in half.

"This," Bast said, "is combat magic."

At first I was too stunned to do anything but watch as Bast launched her green war machine into the middle of the carriers.

She slashed one carrier to pieces with a single swipe, then stepped on another and flattened him into a metal pancake. The other two carriers attacked her holographic legs, but their metal clubs bounced harmlessly off the ghostly light with showers of sparks.

Meanwhile Sadie stood in front of the obelisk with her arms raised, shouting: "Open, you stupid piece of rock!"

Finally I drew my sword. My hands were shaking. I didn't want to charge into battle, but I felt like I should help. And if I *had* to fight, I figured having a twenty-foot-tall glowing cat warrior on my side was the way to do it. "Sadie, I—I'm going to help Bast. Keep trying!"

"I *am*!"

I ran forward just as Bast sliced the other two carriers apart like loaves of bread. With relief, I thought: *Well, that's it.*

Then all four carriers began to re-form. The flat one peeled himself off the pavement. The sliced ones' pieces clicked together like magnets, and the carriers stood up good as new.

"Carter, help me hack them apart!" Bast called. "They need to be in smaller pieces!"

I tried to stay out of Bast's way as she sliced and stomped. Then as soon as she disabled a carrier, I went to work chopping its remains into smaller pieces. They seemed more like Play-Doh than metal, because my blade mashed them up pretty easily.

Another few minutes and I was surrounded by piles of coppery rubble. Bast made a glowing fist and smashed the sedan into kindling.

"That wasn't so hard," I said. "What were we running for?"

Inside her glowing shell, Bast's face was coated with sweat. It hadn't occurred to me that a goddess could get tired, but her magic avatar must've taken a lot of effort.

"We're not safe yet," she warned. "Sadie, how's it coming?"

"It's not," Sadie complained. "Isn't there another way?"

Before Bast could answer, the bushes rustled with a new sound—like rain, except more *slithery.*

A chill ran up my back. "What…what is that?"

"No," Bast murmured. "It can't be. Not her."

Then the bushes exploded. A thousand brown creepy-crawlies poured from the woods in a carpet of grossness—all pincers and stinging tails.

I wanted to yell, "Scorpions!" But my voice wouldn't work. My legs started trembling. I *hate* scorpions. They're everywhere in Egypt. Many times I'd found them in my hotel bed or shower. Once I'd even found one in my sock.

"Sadie!" Bast called urgently.

“Nothing!” Sadie moaned.

The scorpions kept coming—thousands upon thousands. Out of the woods a woman appeared, walking fearlessly through the middle of the arachnids. She wore brown robes with gold jewelry glinting around her neck and arms. Her long black hair was cut Ancient Egyptian–style with a strange crown on top. Then I realized it wasn’t a crown—she had a live, supersize scorpion nesting on her head. Millions of the little nasties swirled around her like she was the center of their storm.

“Serqet,” Bast growled.

“The scorpion goddess,” I guessed. Maybe that should’ve terrified me, but I was already pretty much at my maximum. “Can you take her?”

Bast’s expression didn’t reassure me.

“Carter, Sadie,” she said, “this is going to get ugly. Get to the museum. Find the temple. It may protect you.”

“What temple?” I asked.

“And what about you?” Sadie added.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll catch up.” But when Bast looked at me, I could tell she wasn’t sure. She was just buying us time.

“Go!” she ordered. She turned her giant green cat warrior to face the mass of scorpions.

Embarrassing truth? In the face of those scorpions, I didn’t even pretend to be brave. I grabbed Sadie’s arm and we ran.

SADIE

11. We Meet the Human Flamethrower

RIGHT, I'M TAKING THE MICROPHONE. There is *no chance* Carter would tell this part properly, as it's about Zia. [Shut up, Carter. You know it's true.]

Oh, who is Zia? Sorry, getting ahead of myself.

We raced to the entrance of the museum, and I had no idea why, except that a giant glowing cat woman had told us to. Now, you must realize I was already devastated by everything that had happened. First, I'd lost my father. Second, my loving grandparents had kicked me out of the flat. Then I'd discovered I was apparently "blood of the pharaohs," born to a magical family, and all sorts of rubbish that sounded quite impressive but only brought me loads of trouble. And as soon as I'd found a new home—a mansion with proper breakfast and friendly pets and quite a nice room for me, by the way—Uncle Amos disappeared, my lovely new crocodile and baboon friends were tossed in a river, and the mansion was set on fire. And if *that* wasn't enough, my faithful cat Muffin had decided to engage in a hopeless battle with a swarm of scorpions.

Do you call it a "swarm" for scorpions? A herd? A gaggle? Oh, never mind.

The point is I couldn't believe I'd been asked to open a magic doorway when clearly I had no such skill, and now my brother was dragging me away. I felt like an utter failure. [And no comments from you, Carter. As I recall, *you* weren't much help at the time, either.]

"We can't just leave Bast!" I shouted. "Look!"

Carter kept running, dragging me along, but I could see quite clearly what was happening back at the obelisk. A mass of scorpions had crawled up Bast's glowing green legs and were wriggling into the hologram like it was gelatin. Bast smashed hundreds of them with her feet and fists, but there were simply too many. Soon they were up to her waist, and her ghostly shell began to flicker. Meanwhile, the brown-robed goddess advanced slowly, and I had a feeling she would be worse than any number of scorpions.

Carter pulled me through a row of bushes and I lost sight of Bast. We burst onto Fifth Avenue, which seemed ridiculously normal after the magic battle. We ran down the sidewalk, shoved through a knot of pedestrians, and climbed the steps of the Met.

A banner above the entrance announced some sort of special Christmas event, which I suppose is why the museum was open on a holiday, but I didn't bother reading the details. We pushed straight inside.

What did it look like? Well, it was a museum: huge entry hall, lots of columns and so on. I can't claim I spent much time admiring the decor. I do remember it had queues for the ticket windows, because we ran right past them. There were also security guards, because they yelled at us as we dashed into the exhibits. By luck, we ended up in the Egyptian area, in front of a reconstructed tomb

sort of place with narrow corridors. Carter probably could've told you what the structure was supposed to be, but honestly I didn't care.

"Come on," I said.

We slipped inside the exhibit, which proved quite enough to lose the security guards, or perhaps they had better things to do than pursue naughty children.

When we popped out again, we sneaked around until we were sure we weren't being followed. The Egypt wing wasn't crowded—just a few clumps of old people and a foreign tour group with a guide explaining a sarcophagus in French. *"Et voici la momie!"*

Strangely, no one seemed to notice the enormous sword on Carter's back, which surely must've been a security issue (and much more interesting than the exhibits). A few old people did give us odd looks, but I suspect that was because we were dressed in linen pajamas, drenched in sweat, and covered in grass and leaves. My hair was probably a nightmare as well.

I found an empty room and pulled Carter aside. The glass cases were full of *shabti*. A few days earlier I wouldn't have given them a second thought. Now, I kept glancing at the statues, sure they'd come to life any minute and try to bash me on the head.

"What now?" I asked Carter. "Did you see any temple?"

"No." He knit his eyebrows as if trying hard to remember. "I think there's a rebuilt temple down that hall…or is that in the Brooklyn Museum? Maybe the one in Munich? Sorry, I've been to so many museums with Dad that they all get mixed together."

I sighed in exasperation. "Poor boy, forced to travel the world, skip school, and spend time with Dad while I get a whole two days a year with him!"

"Hey!" Carter turned on me with surprising force. "You get a *home*! You get friends and a normal life and don't wake up each morning wondering what country you're in! You don't—"

The glass case next to us shattered, spraying glass at our feet.

Carter looked at me, bewildered. "Did we just—"

"Like my exploding birthday cake," I grumbled, trying not to let on how startled I was. "You need to control your temper."

"Me?"

Alarms began to blare. Red lights pulsed through the corridor. A garbled voice came on the loudspeaker and said something about proceeding calmly to the exits. The French tour group ran past us, screaming in panic, followed by a crowd of remarkably fast old people with walkers and canes.

"Let's finish arguing later, shall we?" I told Carter. "Come on!"

We ran down another corridor, and the sirens died as suddenly as they'd started. The blood-red lights kept pulsing in eerie silence. Then I heard it: the slithering, clacking sounds of scorpions.

"What about Bast?" My voice choked up. "Is she—"

"Don't think about it," Carter said, though, judging from his face, that's *exactly* what he was thinking about. "Keep moving!"

Soon we were hopelessly lost. As far as I could tell, the Egyptian part of the museum was designed to be as confusing as possible, with dead ends and halls that doubled back on themselves. We passed hieroglyphic scrolls, gold jewelry, sarcophagi, statues of pharaohs, and huge chunks of limestone.

Why would someone display a rock? Aren't there enough of those in the world?

We saw no one, but the slithering sounds grew louder no matter which way we ran. Finally I rounded a corner and smacked straight into someone.

I yelped and scrambled backwards, only to stumble into Carter. We both fell on our bums in a most unflattering way. It's a miracle Carter didn't impale himself on his own sword.

At first I didn't recognize the girl standing in front of us, which seems strange, looking back on it. Perhaps she was using some sort of magic aura, or perhaps I just didn't want to believe it was *her*.

She looked a bit taller than me. Probably older, too, but not by much. Her black hair was trimmed along her jawline and longer in the front so that it swept over her eyes. She had caramel-colored skin and pretty, vaguely Arab features. Her eyes—lined in black kohl, Egyptian style—were a strange amber color that was either quite beautiful or a bit scary; I couldn't decide which. She had a backpack on her shoulder, and wore sandals and loose-fitting linen clothes like ours. She looked as if she were on her way to a martial arts class. God, now that I think of it, we probably looked the same way. How embarrassing.

I slowly began to realize I'd seen her before. She was the girl with the knife from the British Museum. Before I could say anything, Carter sprang to his feet. He moved in front of me and brandished his sword as if trying to *protect* me. Can you believe the nerve?

"Get—get back!" he stammered.

The girl reached into her sleeve and produced a curved white piece of ivory—an Egyptian wand.

She flicked it to one side, and Carter's sword flew out of his hands and clattered to the floor.

"Don't embarrass yourself," the girl said sternly. "Where is Amos?"

Carter looked too stunned to speak. The girl turned towards me. Her golden eyes were both beautiful *and* scary, I decided, and I didn't like her a bit.

"Well?" she demanded.

I didn't see why I needed to tell her a bloody thing, but an uncomfortable pressure started building in my chest, like a burp trying to get free. I heard myself say, "Amos is gone. He left this morning."

"And the cat demon?"

"That's *my* cat," I said. "And she's a goddess, not a demon. She saved us from the scorpions!"

Carter unfroze. He snatched up his sword and pointed it at the girl again. Full credit for persistence, I suppose.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What do you want?"

"My name is Zia Rashid." She tilted her head as if listening.

Right on cue, the entire building rumbled. Dust sprinkled from the ceiling, and the slithering sounds of scorpions doubled in volume behind us.

"And right now," Zia continued, sounding a bit disappointed, "I must save your miserable lives. Let's go."

I suppose we could've refused, but our choices seemed to be Zia or the scorpions, so we ran after her.

She passed a case full of statues and casually tapped the glass with her wand. Tiny granite pharaohs and limestone gods stirred at her command. They hopped off their pedestals and crashed through the glass. Some wielded weapons. Others simply cracked their stone knuckles. They let us pass, but stared down the corridor behind us as if waiting for the enemy.

"Hurry," Zia told us. "These will only—"

"Buy us time," I guessed. "Yes, we've heard that before."

"You talk too much," Zia said without stopping.

I was about to make a withering retort. Honestly, I would've put her in her place quite properly. But just then we emerged into an enormous room and my voice abandoned me.

"Whoa," Carter said.

I couldn't help agreeing with him. The place was extremely *whoa*.

The room was the size of a football stadium. One wall was made completely of glass and looked out on the park. In the middle of the room, on a raised platform, an ancient building had been reconstructed. There was a freestanding stone gateway about eight meters tall, and behind that an open courtyard and square structure made of uneven sandstone blocks carved all over on the outside with images of gods and pharaohs and hieroglyphs. Flanking the building's entrance were two columns bathed in eerie light.

"An Egyptian temple," I guessed.

"The Temple of Dendur," Zia said. "Actually it was built by the Romans—"

"When they occupied Egypt," Carter said, like this was delightful information. "Augustus commissioned it."

"Yes," Zia said.

"Fascinating," I murmured. "Would you two like to be left alone with a history textbook?"

Zia scowled at me. "At any rate, the temple was dedicated to Isis, so it will have enough power to open a gate."

"To summon more gods?" I asked.

Zia's eyes flashed angrily. "Accuse me of that again, and I will cut out your tongue. I meant a gateway to get you out of here."

I felt completely lost, but I was getting used to that. We followed Zia up the steps and through the temple's stone gateway.

The courtyard was empty, abandoned by the fleeing museum visitors, which made it feel quite creepy. Giant carvings of gods stared down at me. Hieroglyphic inscriptions were everywhere, and I was afraid that if I concentrated too hard, I might be able to read them.

Zia stopped at the front steps of the temple. She held up her wand and wrote in the air. A familiar hieroglyph burned between the columns.

Open—the same symbol Dad had used at the Rosetta Stone. I waited for something to blow up, but the hieroglyph simply faded.

Zia opened her backpack. "We'll make our stand here until the gate can be opened."

"Why not just open it now?" Carter asked.

"Portals can only appear at auspicious moments," Zia said. "Sunrise, sunset, midnight, eclipses, astrological alignments, the exact time of a god's birth—"

"Oh, come on," I said. "How can you possibly know all that?"

"It takes years to memorize the complete calendar," Zia said. "But the next auspicious moment is easy: high noon. Ten and a half minutes from now."

She didn't check a watch. I wondered how she knew the time so precisely, but I decided it wasn't the most important question.

"Why should we trust you?" I asked. "As I recall, at the British Museum, you wanted to gut us with a knife."

"That would've been simpler." Zia sighed. "Unfortunately, my superiors think you might be *innocents*. So for now, I can't kill you. But I also can't allow you to fall into the hands of the Red Lord. And so…you can trust me."

"Well, I'm convinced," I said. "I feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

Zia reached in her bag and took out four little statues—animal-headed men, each about five centimeters tall. She handed them to me. "Put the Sons of Horus around us at the cardinal points."

"Excuse me?"

"North, south, east, west." She spoke slowly, as if I were an idiot.

"I know compass directions! But—"

"That's north." Zia pointed out the wall of glass. "Figure out the rest."

I did what she asked, though I didn't see how the little men would help. Meanwhile, Zia gave Carter a piece of chalk and told him to draw a circle around us, connecting the statues.

"Magic protection," Carter said. "Like what Dad did at the British Museum."

"Yes," I grumbled. "And we saw how well *that* worked."

Carter ignored me. What else is new? He was so eager to please Zia that he jumped right to the task of drawing his sidewalk art.

Then Zia took something else from her bag—a plain wooden rod like the one our dad had used in London. She spoke a word under her breath, and the rod expanded into a two-meter-long black staff topped with a carved lion's head. She twirled it around single-handedly like a baton—just showing off, I was sure—while holding the wand in her other hand.

Carter finished the chalk circle as the first scorpions appeared at the gallery's entrance.

"How much longer on that gate?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound as terrified as I felt.

"Stay inside the circle no matter what," Zia said. "When the gate opens, jump through. And keep behind me!"

She touched her wand to the chalk circle, spoke another word, and the circle began to glow dark red.

Hundreds of scorpions swarmed towards the temple, turning the floor into a living mass of claws and stingers. Then the woman in brown, Serqet, entered the gallery. She smiled at us coldly.

"Zia," I said, "that's a goddess. She defeated *Bast*. What chance do *you* have?"

Zia held up her staff and the carved lion's head burst into flames—a small red fireball so bright,

it lit the entire room. “I am a scribe in the House of Life, Sadie Kane. I am trained to fight gods.”

12. A Jump Through the Hourglass

WELL, THAT WAS ALL VERY IMPRESSIVE, I suppose. You should've seen Carter's face—he looked like an excited puppy. [Oh, stop shoving me. You did!]

But I felt much less sure of Miss Zia "I'm-So-Magical" Rashid when the army of scorpions scuttled towards us. I wouldn't have thought it possible so many scorpions existed in the world, much less in Manhattan. The glowing circle round us seemed like insignificant protection against the millions of arachnids crawling over one another, many layers deep, and the woman in brown, who was even more horrible.

From a distance she looked all right, but as she got closer I saw that Serqet's pale skin glistened like an insect shell. Her eyes were beady black. Her long, dark hair was unnaturally thick, as if made from a million bristling bug antennae. And when she opened her mouth, sideways mandibles snapped and retracted outside her regular human teeth.

The goddess stopped about twenty meters away, studying us. Her hateful black eyes fixed on Zia. "Give me the younglings."

Her voice was harsh and raspy, as if she hadn't spoken in centuries.

Zia crossed her staff and wand. "I am mistress of the elements, Scribe of the First Nome. Leave or be destroyed."

Serqet clicked her mandibles in a gruesome foamy grin. Some of her scorpions advanced, but when the first one touched the glowing lines of our protective circle, it sizzled and turned to ashes. Mark my words, *nothing* smells worse than burned scorpion.

The rest of the horrible things retreated, swirling round the goddess and crawling up her legs. With a shudder, I realized they were wriggling into her robes. After a few seconds, all the scorpions had disappeared into the brown folds of her clothes.

The air seemed to darken behind Serqet, as if she were casting an enormous shadow. Then the darkness rose up and took the form of a massive scorpion tail, arcing over Serqet's head. It lashed down at us at blazing speed, but Zia raised her wand and the sting glanced off the ivory tip with a hissing sound. Steam rolled off Zia's wand, smelling of sulfur.

Zia pointed her staff towards the goddess, engulfing her body in fire. Serqet screamed and staggered backwards, but the fire died almost instantly. It left Serqet's robes seared and smoking, but the goddess looked more enraged than hurt.

"Your days are past, magician. The House is weak. Lord Set will lay waste to this land."

Zia threw her wand like a boomerang. It smashed into the shadowy scorpion tail and exploded in a blinding flash of light. Serqet lurched back and averted her eyes, and as she did, Zia reached into

her sleeve and brought out something small—something closed inside her fist.

The wand was a diversion, I thought. *A magician's sleight of hand.*

Then Zia did something reckless: she leaped out of the magic circle—the very thing she'd warned us not to do.

"Zia!" Carter called. "The gate!"

I glanced behind me, and my heart almost stopped. The space between the two columns at the temple's entrance was now a vertical tunnel of sand, as if I were looking into the funnel of an enormous sideways hourglass. I could feel it tugging at me, pulling me towards it with magical gravity.

"I'm not going in *there,*" I insisted, but another flash of light brought my attention back to Zia.

She and the goddess were involved in a dangerous dance. Zia twirled and spun with her fiery staff, and everywhere she passed, she left a trail of flames burning in the air. I had to admit it: Zia was almost as graceful and impressive as Bast.

I had the oddest desire to help. I wanted—very badly, in fact—to step outside the circle and engage in combat. It was a completely mad urge, of course. What could I possibly have done? But still I felt I shouldn't—or *couldn't*—jump through the gate without helping Zia.

"Sadie!" Carter grabbed me and pulled me back. Without my even realizing it, my foot had almost stepped across the line of chalk. "What are you thinking?"

I didn't have an answer, but I stared at Zia and mumbled in a sort of trance, "She's going to use ribbons. They won't work."

"What?" Carter demanded. "Come on, we've got to go through the gate!"

Just then Zia opened her fist and small red tendrils of cloth fluttered into the air. *Ribbons*. How had I known? They zipped about like living things—like eels in water—and began to grow larger.

Serqet was still concentrating on the fire, trying to keep Zia from caging her. At first she didn't seem to notice the ribbons, which grew until they were several meters long. I counted five, six, seven of them in all. They zipped around, orbiting Serqet, ripping through her shadow scorpion as if it were a harmless illusion. Finally they wrapped around Serqet's body, pinning her arms and legs. She screamed as if the ribbons burned her. She dropped to her knees, and the shadow scorpion disintegrated into an inky haze.

Zia spun to a stop. She pointed her staff at the goddess's face. The ribbons began to glow, and the goddess hissed in pain, cursing in a language I didn't know.

"I bind you with the Seven Ribbons of Hathor," Zia said. "Release your host or your essence will burn forever."

"Your *death* will last forever!" Serqet snarled. "You have made an enemy of Set!"

Zia twisted her staff, and Serqet fell sideways, writhing and smoking.

"I will…not…" the goddess hissed. But then her black eyes turned milky white, and she lay still.

"The gate!" Carter warned. "Zia, come on! I think it's closing!"

He was right. The tunnel of sand seemed to be moving a bit more slowly. The tug of its magic did not feel as strong.

Zia approached the fallen goddess. She touched Serqet's forehead, and black smoke billowed from the goddess's mouth. Serqet transformed and shrank until we were looking at a completely

different woman wrapped in red ribbons. She had pale skin and black hair, but otherwise she didn't look anything like Serqet. She looked, well, *human.*

"Who is that?" I asked.

"The host," Zia said. "Some poor mortal who—"

She looked up with a start. The black haze was no longer dissipating. It was getting thicker and darker again, swirling into a more solid form.

"Impossible," Zia said. "The ribbons are too powerful. Serqet *can't* re-form unless—"

"Well, she *is* re-forming," Carter yelled, "and our exit is closing! Let's go!"

I couldn't believe he was willing to jump into a churning wall of sand, but as I watched the black cloud take the shape of a two-story-tall scorpion—a very *angry* scorpion—I made my decision.

"Coming!" I yelled.

"Zia!" Carter yelled. "Now!"

"Perhaps you're right," the magician decided. She turned, and together we ran and plunged straight into the swirling vortex.

CARTER

13. I Face the Killer Turkey

MY TURN.

First of all, Sadie's "puppy dog" comment was totally out of line. I was *not* starry-eyed about Zia. It's just that I don't meet a lot of people who can throw fireballs and battle gods. [Stop making faces at me, Sadie. You look like Khufu.]

Anyway, we plunged into the sand tunnel.

Everything went dark. My stomach tingled with that top-of-the-roller-coaster weightlessness as I hurtled forward. Hot winds whipped around me, and my skin burned.

Then I tumbled out onto a cold tile floor, and Sadie and Zia crashed on top of me.

"Ow!" I grumbled.

The first thing I noticed was the fine layer of sand covering my body like powdered sugar. Then my eyes adjusted to the harsh light. We were in a big building like a shopping mall, with crowds bustling around us.

No…not a mall. It was a two-level airport concourse, with shops, lots of windows, and polished steel columns. Outside, it was dark, so I knew we must be in a different time zone. Announcements echoed over the intercom in a language that sounded like Arabic.

Sadie spit sand out of her mouth. "Yuck!"

"Come on," Zia said. "We can't stay here."

I struggled to my feet. People were streaming past—some in Western clothes, some in robes and headscarves. A family arguing in German rushed by and almost ran over me with their suitcases.

Then I turned and saw something I recognized. In the middle of the concourse stood a life-size replica of an Ancient Egyptian boat made from glowing display cases—a sales counter for perfume and jewelry.

"This is the Cairo airport," I said.

"Yes," Zia said. "Now, let's go!"

"Why the rush? Can Serqet…can she follow us through that sand gate?"

Zia shook her head. "An artifact overheats whenever it creates a gate. It requires a twelve-hour cooldown before it can be used again. But we still have to worry about airport security. Unless you'd like to meet the Egyptian police, you'll come with me *now*."

She grabbed our arms and steered us through the crowd. We must've looked like beggars in our old-fashioned clothes, covered head-to-toe in sand. People gave us a wide berth, but nobody tried to stop us.

"Why are we here?" Sadie demanded.

"To see the ruins of Heliopolis," Zia said.

"Inside an *airport*?" Sadie asked.

I remembered something Dad had told me years ago, and my scalp tingled.

"Sadie, the ruins are *under* us." I looked at Zia. "That's right, isn't it?"

She nodded. "The ancient city was pillaged centuries ago. Some of its monuments were carted away, like Cleopatra's two needles. Most of its temples were broken down to make new buildings. What was left disappeared under Cairo's suburbs. The largest section is under this airport."

"And how does that help us?" Sadie asked.

Zia kicked open a maintenance door. On the other side was a broom closet. Zia muttered a command—*"Sahad"*—and the image of the closet shimmered and disappeared, revealing a set of stone steps leading down.

"Because not *all* Heliopolis is in ruins," Zia said. "Follow closely. And *touch nothing*."

The stairs must've led down about seven million miles, because we descended *forever*. The passage had been made for miniature people, too. We had to crouch and crawl most of the way, and even so, I bonked my head on the ceiling a dozen times. The only light was from a ball of fire in Zia's palm, which made shadows dance across the walls.

I'd been in places like this before—tunnels inside pyramids, tombs my dad had excavated—but I've never liked them. Millions of tons of rock above me seemed to crush the air out of my lungs.

Finally we reached the bottom. The tunnel opened up, and Zia stopped abruptly. After my eyes adjusted, I saw why. We were standing at the edge of a chasm.

A single wooden plank spanned the void. On the opposite ledge, two jackal-headed granite warriors flanked a doorway, their spears crossed over the entrance.

Sadie sighed. "Please, no more psychotic statues."

"Do not joke," Zia warned. "This is an entrance to the First Nome, the oldest branch of the House of Life, headquarters for all magicians. My job was to bring you here safely, but I cannot help you cross. Each magician must unbar the path for herself, and the challenge is different for each supplicant."

She looked at Sadie expectantly, which annoyed me. First Bast, now Zia—both of them treated Sadie like she should have some kind of superpowers. I mean, okay, so she'd been able to blast the library doors apart, but why didn't anyone look at *me* to do cool tricks?

Plus, I was still annoyed with Sadie for the comments she'd made at the museum in New York—how I had it so good traveling the world with Dad. She had no idea how often I wanted to complain about the constant traveling, how many days I wished I didn't have to get on a plane and could just be like a normal kid going to school and making friends. But I couldn't complain. *You always have to look impeccable,* Dad had told me. And he didn't just mean my clothes. He meant my attitude. With Mom gone, I was all he had. Dad needed me to be strong. Most days, I didn't mind. I loved my dad. But it was also hard.

Sadie didn't understand that. *She* had it easy. And now she seemed to be getting all the attention, as if *she* were the special one. It wasn't fair.

Then I heard Dad's voice in my head: "Fairness means everyone gets what they need. And the only way to get what you need is to make it happen yourself."

I don't know what got into me, but I drew my sword and marched across the plank. It was like my legs were working by themselves, not waiting for my brain. Part of me thought: *This is a really bad idea.* But part of me answered: *No, we do not fear this.* And the voice didn't sound like mine.

"Carter!" Sadie cried.

I kept walking. I tried not to look down at the yawning void under my feet, but the sheer size of the chasm made me dizzy. I felt like one of those gyroscope toys, spinning and wobbling as I crossed the narrow plank.

As I got closer to the opposite side, the doorway between the two statues began to glow, like a curtain of red light.

I took a deep breath. Maybe the red light was a portal, like the gate of sand. If I just charged through fast enough…

Then the first dagger shot out of the tunnel.

My sword was in motion before I realized it. The dagger should've impaled me in the chest, but somehow I deflected it with my blade and sent it sailing into the abyss. Two more daggers shot out of the tunnel. I'd never had the best reflexes, but now they sped up. I ducked one dagger and hooked the other with the curved blade of my sword, turned the dagger and flung it back into the tunnel. *How the heck did I do that?*

I advanced to the end of the plank and slashed through the red light, which flickered and died. I waited for the statues to come alive, but nothing happened. The only sound was a dagger clattering against the rocks in the chasm far below.

The doorway began to glow again. The red light coalesced into a strange form: a five-foot-tall bird with a man's head. I raised my sword, but Zia yelled, "Carter, no!"

The bird creature folded his wings. His eyes, lined with kohl, narrowed as they studied me. A black ornamental wig glistened on his head, and his face was etched with wrinkles. One of those fake braided pharaoh beards was stuck on his chin like a backward ponytail. He didn't look hostile, except for the red flickering light all around him, and the fact that from the neck down he was the world's largest killer turkey.

Then a chilling thought occurred to me: This was a bird with a human head, the same form I'd imagined taking when I slept in Amos's house, when my soul left my body and flew to Phoenix. I had no idea what that meant, but it scared me.

The bird creature scratched at the stone floor. Then, unexpectedly, he smiled.

"Pari, niswa nafeer," he told me, or at least that's what it sounded like.

Zia gasped. She and Sadie were standing behind me now, their faces pale. Apparently they'd managed to cross the chasm without my noticing.

Finally Zia seemed to collect herself. She bowed to the bird creature. Sadie followed her example.

The creature winked at me, as if we'd just shared a joke. Then he vanished. The red light faded. The statues retracted their arms, uncrossing their spears from the entrance.

"That's it?" I asked. "What did the turkey say?"

Zia looked at me with something like fear. "That was *not* a turkey, Carter. That was a *ba.* "

I'd heard my dad use that word before, but I couldn't place it. "Another monster?"

"A human soul," Zia said. "In this case, a spirit of the dead. A magician from ancient times, come back to serve as a guardian. They watch the entrances of the House."

She studied my face as if I'd just developed some terrible rash.

"What?" I demanded. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"Nothing," she said. "We must hurry."

She squeezed by me on the ledge and disappeared into the tunnel.

Sadie was staring at me too.

"All right," I said. "What did the bird guy say? You understood it?"

She nodded uneasily. "He mistook you for someone else. He must have bad eyesight."

"Because?"

"Because he said, 'Go forth, good king.'"

I was in a daze after that. We passed through the tunnel and entered a vast underground city of halls and chambers, but I only remember bits and pieces of it.

The ceilings soared to twenty or thirty feet, so it didn't feel like we were underground. Every chamber was lined with massive stone columns like the ones I'd seen in Egyptian ruins, but these were in perfect condition, brightly painted to resemble palm trees, with carved green fronds at the top, so I felt like I was walking through a petrified forest. Fires burned in copper braziers. They didn't seem to make any smoke, but the air smelled good, like a marketplace for spices—cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, and others I couldn't identify. The city smelled like Zia. I realized that this was her home.

We saw a few other people—mostly older men and women. Some wore linen robes, some modern clothes. One guy in a business suit walked past with a black leopard on a leash, as if that were completely normal. Another guy barked orders to a small army of brooms, mops, and buckets that were scuttling around, cleaning up the city.

"Like that cartoon," Sadie said. "Where Mickey Mouse tries to do magic and the brooms keep splitting and toting water."

"'The Sorcerer's Apprentice,'" Zia said. "You do know that was based on an Egyptian story, don't you?"

Sadie just stared back. I knew how she felt. It was too much to process.

We walked through a hall of jackal-headed statues, and I could swear their eyes watched us as we passed. A few minutes later, Zia led us through an open-air market—if you can call anything "open-air" underground—with dozens of stalls selling weird items like boomerang wands, animated clay dolls, parrots, cobras, papyrus scrolls, and hundreds of different glittering amulets.

Next we crossed a path of stones over a dark river teeming with fish. I thought they were perch until I saw their vicious teeth.

"Are those piranhas?" I asked.

"Tiger fish from the Nile," Zia said. "Like piranhas, except these can weigh up to sixteen pounds."

I watched my step more closely after that.

We turned a corner and passed an ornate building carved out of black rock. Seated pharaohs were chiseled into the walls, and the doorway was shaped like a coiled serpent.

"What's in there?" Sadie asked.

We peeked inside and saw rows of children—maybe two dozen in all, about six to ten years old or so—sitting cross-legged on cushions. They were hunched over brass bowls, peering intently into some sort of liquid and speaking under their breath. At first I thought it was a classroom, but there was no sign of a teacher, and the chamber was lit only by a few candles. Judging by the number of empty seats, the room was meant to hold twice as many kids.

"Our initiates," Zia said, "learning to scry. The First Nome must keep in contact with our brethren all over the world. We use our youngest as…operators, I suppose you would say."

"So you've got bases like this all over the world?"

"Most are much smaller, but yes."

I remembered what Amos had told us about the nomes. "Egypt is the First Nome. New York is the Twenty-first. What's the last one, the Three-hundred-and-sixtieth?"

"That would be Antarctica," Zia said. "A punishment assignment. Nothing there but a couple of cold magicians and some magic penguins."

"Magic penguins?"

"Don't ask."

Sadie pointed to the children inside. "How does it work? They see images in the water?"

"It's oil," Zia said. "But yes."

"So few," Sadie said. "Are these the only initiates in the whole city?"

"In the whole *world*," Zia corrected. "There were more before—" She stopped herself.

"Before what?" I asked.

"Nothing," Zia said darkly. "Initiates do our scrying because young minds are most receptive. Magicians begin training no later than the age of ten…with a few dangerous exceptions."

"You mean us," I said.

She glanced at me apprehensively, and I knew she was still thinking about what the bird spirit had called me: a *good king*. It seemed so unreal, like our family name in that *Blood of the Pharaohs* scroll. How could I be related to some ancient kings? And even if I was, *I* certainly wasn't a king. I had no kingdom. I didn't even have my single suitcase anymore.

"They'll be waiting for you," Zia said. "Come along."

We walked so far, my feet began to ache.

Finally we arrived at a crossroads. On the right was a massive set of bronze doors with fires blazing on either side; on the left, a twenty-foot-tall sphinx carved into the wall. A doorway nestled between its paws, but it was bricked in and covered in cobwebs.

"That looks like the Sphinx at Giza," I said.

"That's because we are directly under the *real* Sphinx," Zia said. "That tunnel leads straight up to it. Or it used to, before it was sealed."

"But…" I did some quick calculations in my head. "The Sphinx is, like, twenty miles from the Cairo Airport."

"Roughly."

"No way we've walked that far."

Zia actually smiled, and I couldn't help noticing how pretty her eyes were. "Distance changes in magic places, Carter. Surely you've learned that by now."

Sadie cleared her throat. "So why is the tunnel closed, then?"

"The Sphinx was too popular with archaeologists," Zia said. "They kept digging around. Finally, in the 1980s, they discovered the first part of the tunnel under the Sphinx."

"Dad told me about that!" I said. "But he said the tunnel was a dead end."

"It was when we got through with it. We couldn't let the archaeologists know how much they're missing. Egypt's leading archaeologist recently speculated that they've only discovered thirty percent of the ancient ruins in Egypt. In truth, they've only discovered one tenth, and not even the *interesting* tenth."

"What about King Tut's tomb?" I protested.

"That boy king?" Zia rolled her eyes. "*Boring.* You should see some of the *good* tombs."

I felt a little hurt. Dad had named me after Howard Carter, the guy who discovered King Tut's tomb, so I'd always felt a personal attachment to it. If that wasn't a "good" tomb, I wondered what was.

Zia turned to face the bronze doors.

"This is the Hall of Ages." She placed her palm against the seal, which bore the symbol of the House of Life.

The hieroglyphs began to glow, and the doors swung open.

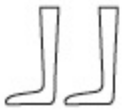
Zia turned to us, her expression deadly serious. "You are about to meet the Chief Lector. Behave yourselves, unless you wish to be turned into insects."

14. A French Guy Almost Kills Us

THE LAST COUPLE OF DAYS I'd seen a lot of crazy things, but the Hall of Ages took the prize.

Double rows of stone pillars held up a ceiling so high, you could've parked a blimp under it with no trouble. A shimmering blue carpet that looked like water ran down the center of the hall, which was so long, I couldn't see the end even though it was brightly lit. Balls of fire floated around like helium basketballs, changing color whenever they bumped into one another. Millions of tiny hieroglyphic symbols also drifted through the air, randomly combining into words and then breaking apart.

I grabbed a pair of glowing red legs.



They walked across my palm before jumping off and dissolving.

But the weirdest things were the *displays*.

I don't know what else to call them. Between the columns on either side of us, images shifted, coming into focus and then blurring out again like holograms in a sandstorm.

"Come on," Zia told us. "And don't spend too much time looking."

It was impossible not to. The first twenty feet or so, the magical scenes cast a golden light across the hall. A blazing sun rose above an ocean. A mountain emerged from the water, and I had the feeling I was watching the beginning of the world. Giants strode across the Nile Valley: a man with black skin and the head of a jackal, a lioness with bloody fangs, a beautiful woman with wings of light.

Sadie stepped off the rug. In a trance, she reached toward the images.

"Stay on the carpet!" Zia grabbed Sadie's hand and pulled her back toward the center of the hall. "You are seeing the Age of the Gods. No mortal should dwell on these images."

"But…" Sadie blinked. "They're only pictures, aren't they?"

"Memories," Zia said, "so powerful they could destroy your mind."

"Oh," Sadie said in a small voice.

We kept walking. The images changed to silver. I saw armies clashing—Egyptians in kilts and sandals and leather armor, fighting with spears. A tall, dark-skinned man in red-and-white armor placed a double crown on his head: Narmer, the king who united Upper and Lower Egypt. Sadie was right: he did look a bit like Dad.

"This is the Old Kingdom," I guessed. "The first great age of Egypt."

Zia nodded. As we walked down the hall, we saw workers building the first step pyramid out of

stone. Another few steps, and the biggest pyramid of all rose from the desert at Giza. Its outer layer of smooth white casing stones gleamed in the sun. Ten thousand workers gathered at its base and knelt before the pharaoh, who raised his hands to the sun, dedicating his own tomb.

"Khufu," I said.

"The baboon?" Sadie asked, suddenly interested.

"No, the pharaoh who built the Great Pyramid," I said. "It was the tallest structure in the world for almost four thousand years."

Another few steps, and the images turned from silver to coppery.

"The Middle Kingdom," Zia announced. "A bloody, chaotic time. And yet this is when the House of Life came to maturity."

The scenes shifted more rapidly. We watched armies fighting, temples being built, ships sailing on the Nile, and magicians throwing fire. Every step covered hundreds of years, and yet the hall still went on forever. For the first time I understood just how ancient Egypt was.

We crossed another threshold, and the light turned bronze.

"The New Kingdom," I guessed. "The last time Egypt was ruled by Egyptians."

Zia said nothing, but I watched scenes passing that my dad had described to me: Hatshepsut, the greatest female pharaoh, putting on a fake beard and ruling Egypt as a man; Ramesses the Great leading his chariots into battle.

I saw magicians dueling in a palace. A man in tattered robes, with a shaggy black beard and wild eyes, threw down his staff, which turned into a serpent and devoured a dozen other snakes.

I got a lump in my throat. "Is that—"

"Musa," Zia said. "Or Moshe, as his own people knew him. You call him Moses. The only foreigner ever to defeat the House in a magic duel."

I stared at her. "You're kidding, right?"

"We would not kid about such a thing."

The scene shifted again. I saw a man standing over a table of battle figurines: wooden toy ships, soldiers, and chariots. The man was dressed like a pharaoh, but his face looked oddly familiar. He looked up and seemed to smile right at me. With a chill, I realized he had the same face as the ba, the bird-faced spirit who'd challenged me on the bridge.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Nectanebo II," Zia said. "The last native Egyptian king, and the last sorcerer pharaoh. He could move entire armies, create or destroy navies by moving pieces on his board, but in the end, it was not enough."

We stepped over another line and the images shimmered blue. "These are the Ptolemaic times," Zia said. "Alexander the Great conquered the known world, including Egypt. He set up his general Ptolemy as the new pharaoh, and founded a line of Greek kings to rule over Egypt."

The Ptolemaic section of the hall was shorter, and seemed sad compared to all the others. The temples were smaller. The kings and queens looked desperate, or lazy, or simply apathetic. There were no great battles…except toward the end. I saw Romans march into the city of Alexandria. I saw a woman with dark hair and a white dress drop a snake into her blouse.

"Cleopatra," Zia said, "the seventh queen of that name. She tried to stand against the might of

Rome, and she lost. When she took her life, the last line of pharaohs ended. Egypt, the great nation, faded. Our language was forgotten. The ancient rites were suppressed. The House of Life survived, but we were forced into hiding."

We passed into an area of red light, and history began to look familiar. I saw Arab armies riding into Egypt, then the Turks. Napoleon marched his army under the shadow of the pyramids. The British came and built the Suez Canal. Slowly Cairo grew into a modern city. And the old ruins faded farther and farther under the sands of the desert.

"Each year," Zia said, "the Hall of Ages grows longer to encompass our history. Up until the present."

I was so dazed I didn't even realize we'd reached the end of the hall until Sadie grabbed my arm.

In front of us stood a dais and on it an empty throne, a gilded wooden chair with a flail and a shepherd's crook carved in the back—the ancient symbols of the pharaoh.

On the step below the throne sat the oldest man I'd ever seen. His skin was like lunch-bag paper—brown, thin, and crinkled. White linen robes hung loosely off his small frame. A leopard skin was draped around his shoulders, and his hand shakily held a big wooden staff, which I was sure he was going to drop any minute. But weirdest of all, the glowing hieroglyphs in the air seemed to be coming *from him.* Multicolored symbols popped up all around him and floated away as if he were some sort of magic bubble machine.

At first I wasn't sure he was even alive. His milky eyes stared into space. Then he focused on me, and electricity coursed through my body.

He wasn't just looking at me. He was scanning me—reading my entire being.

Hide, something inside me said.

I didn't know where the voice came from, but my stomach clenched. My whole body tensed as if I were bracing for a hit, and the electrical feeling subsided.

The old man raised an eyebrow as if I'd surprised him. He glanced behind him and said something in a language I didn't recognize.

A second man stepped out of the shadows. I wanted to yelp. He was the guy who'd been with Zia in the British Museum—the one with the cream-colored robes and the forked beard.

The bearded man glared at Sadie and me.

"I am Desjardins," he said with a French accent. "My master, Chief Lector Iskandar, welcomes you to the House of Life."

I couldn't think what to say to that, so of course I asked a stupid question. "He's *really* old. Why isn't he sitting on the throne?"

Desjardins' nostrils flared, but the old dude, Iskandar, just chuckled, and said something else in that other language.

Desjardins translated stiffly: "The master says thank you for noticing; he is in fact really old. But the throne is for the pharaoh. It has been vacant since the fall of Egypt to Rome. It is…*comment dit-on?* Symbolic. The Chief Lector's role is to serve and protect the pharaoh. Therefore he sits at the foot of the throne."

I looked at Iskandar a little nervously. I wondered how many years he'd been sitting on that step.

"If you…if he can understand English…what language is he speaking?"

Desjardins sniffed. "The Chief Lector understands many things. But he prefers to speak Alexandrian Greek, his birth tongue."

Sadie cleared her throat. "Sorry, his *birth* tongue? Wasn't Alexander the Great way back in the blue section, thousands of years ago? You make it sound like Lord Salamander is—"

"Lord *Iskandar,*" Desjardins hissed. "Show respect!"

Something clicked in my mind: back in Brooklyn, Amos had talked about the magicians' law against summoning gods—a law made in Roman times by the Chief Lector…Iskandar. Surely it had to be a different guy. Maybe we were talking to Iskandar the XXVII or something.

The old man looked me in the eyes. He smiled, as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. He said something else in Greek, and Desjardins translated.

"The master says not to worry. You will not be held responsible for the past crimes of your family. At least, not until we have investigated you further."

"Gee…thanks," I said.

"Do not mock our generosity, boy," Desjardins warned. "Your father broke our most important law twice: once at Cleopatra's Needle, when he tried to summon the gods and your mother died assisting him. Then again at the British Museum, when your father was foolish enough to use the Rosetta Stone itself. Now your uncle too is missing—"

"You know what's happened to Amos?" Sadie blurted out.

Desjardins scowled. "Not yet," he admitted.

"You have to find him!" Sadie cried. "Don't you have some sort of GPS magic or—"

"We are searching," Desjardins said. "But you cannot worry about Amos. You must stay here. You must be…*trained.*"

I got the impression he was going to say a different word, something not as nice as trained.

Iskandar spoke directly to me. His tone sounded kindly.

"The master warns that the Demon Days begin tomorrow at sunset," Desjardins translated. "You must be kept safe."

"But we have to find our dad!" I said. "Dangerous gods are on the loose out there. We saw Serqet. And Set!"

At these names, Iskandar's expression tightened. He turned and gave Desjardins what sounded like an order. Desjardins protested. Iskandar repeated his statement.

Desjardins clearly didn't like it, but he bowed to his master. Then he turned toward me. "The Chief Lector wishes to hear your story."

So I told him, with Sadie jumping in whenever I stopped to take a breath. The funny thing was, we both left out certain things without planning to. We didn't mention Sadie's magic abilities, or the encounter with the *ba* who'd called me a king. It was like I literally *couldn't* mention those things. Whenever I tried, the voice inside my head whispered, *Not that part. Be silent.*

When I was done, I glanced at Zia. She said nothing, but she was studying me with a troubled expression.

Iskandar traced a circle on the step with the butt of his staff. More hieroglyphs popped into the

air and floated away.

After several seconds, Desjardins seemed to grow impatient. He stepped forward and glared at us. "You are lying. That could not have been Set. He would need a powerful host to remain in this world. *Very* powerful."

"Look, you," Sadie said. "I don't know what all this rubbish is about hosts, but I saw Set with my own eyes. You were there at the British Museum—you must have done, too. And if Carter saw him in Phoenix, Arizona, then…" She looked at me doubtfully. "Then he's probably not crazy."

"Thanks, Sis," I mumbled, but Sadie was just getting started.

"And as for Serqet, she's real too! Our friend, my cat, Bast, died protecting us!"

"So," Desjardins said coldly, "you admit to consorting with gods. That makes our investigation much easier. Bast is not your *friend.* The gods caused the downfall of Egypt. It is forbidden to call on their powers. Magicians are sworn to keep the gods from interfering in the mortal world. We must use all our power to fight them."

"Bast said you were paranoid," Sadie added.

The magician clenched his fists, and the air tingled with the weird smell of ozone, like during a thunderstorm. The hairs on my neck stood straight up. Before anything bad could happen, Zia stepped in front of us.

"Lord Desjardins," she pleaded, "there *was* something strange. When I ensnared the scorpion goddess, she re-formed almost instantly. I could not return her to the Duat, even with the Seven Ribbons. I could only break her hold on the host for a moment. Perhaps the rumors of other escapes —"

"What other escapes?" I asked.

She glanced at me reluctantly. "Other gods, *many* of them, released since last night from artifacts all over the world. Like a chain reaction—"

"Zia!" Desjardins snapped. "That information is not for sharing."

"Look," I said, "lord, sir, whatever—Bast warned us this would happen. She said Set would release more gods."

"Master," Zia pleaded, "if Ma'at is weakening, if Set is increasing chaos, perhaps that is why I could not banish Serqet."

"Ridiculous," Desjardins said. "You are skilled, Zia, but perhaps you were not skilled enough for this encounter. And as for these two, the contamination must be contained."

Zia's face reddened. She turned her attention to Iskandar. "Master, please. Give me a chance with them."

"You forget your place," Desjardins snapped. "These two are guilty and must be destroyed."

My throat started closing up. I looked at Sadie. If we had to make a run for it down that long hall, I didn't like our chances….

The old man finally looked up. He smiled at Zia with true affection. For a second I wondered if she were his great-great-great-granddaughter or something. He spoke in Greek, and Zia bowed deeply.

Desjardins looked ready to explode. He swept his robes away from his feet and marched behind the throne.

“The Chief Lector will allow Zia to test you,” he growled. “Meanwhile, I will seek out the truth—or the lies—in your story. You will be punished for the lies.”

I turned to Iskandar and copied Zia’s bow. Sadie did the same.

“Thank you, master,” I said.

The old man studied me for a long time. Again I felt as if he were trying to burn into my soul—not in an angry way. More out of concern. Then he mumbled something, and I understood two words: *Nectanebo* and *ba*.

He opened his hand and a flood of glowing hieroglyphs poured out, swarming around the dais. There was a blinding flash of light, and when I could see again, the dais was empty. The two men were gone.

Zia turned toward us, her expression grim. “I will show you to your quarters. In the morning, your testing begins. We will see what magic you know, and how you know it.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but I exchanged an uneasy look with Sadie.

“Sounds fun,” Sadie ventured. “And if we fail this test?”

Zia regarded her coldly. “This is not the sort of test you fail, Sadie Kane. You pass or you die.”

SADIE

15. A Godly Birthday Party

THEY TOOK CARTER TO A DIFFERENT dormitory, so I don't know how he slept. But *I* couldn't get a wink.

It would've been hard enough with Zia's comments about passing our tests or dying, but the girls' dormitory just wasn't as posh as Amos's mansion. The stone walls sweated moisture. Creepy pictures of Egyptian monsters danced across the ceiling in the torchlight. I got a floating cot to sleep in, and the other girls in training—*initiates,* Zia had called them—were much younger than me, so when the old dorm matron told them to go to sleep straightaway, they actually *obeyed.* The matron waved her hand and the torches went out. She shut the door behind her, and I could hear the sound of locks clicking.

Lovely. Imprisoned in a nursery school dungeon.

I stared into the dark until I heard the other girls snoring. A single thought kept bothering me: an urge I just couldn't shake. Finally I crept out of bed and tugged on my boots.

I felt my way to the door. I tugged at the handle. Locked, as I suspected. I was tempted to kick it till I remembered what Zia had done in the Cairo Airport broom closet.

I pressed my palm against the door and whispered, *"Sahad."*

Locks clicked. The door swung open. Handy trick.

Outside, the corridors were dark and empty. Apparently, there wasn't much nightlife in the First Nome. I sneaked through the city back the way we'd come and saw nothing but an occasional cobra slithering across the floor. After the last couple of days, that didn't even faze me. I thought about trying to find Carter, but I wasn't sure where they'd taken him, and honestly, I wanted to do this on my own.

After our last argument in New York, I wasn't sure how I felt about my brother. The idea that he could be jealous of *my* life while he got to travel the world with Dad—please! And he had the nerve to call my life *normal*? All right, I had a few mates at school like Liz and Emma, but my life was hardly easy. If Carter made a social faux pas or met people he didn't like, he could just move on! I had to stay put. I couldn't answer simple questions like "Where are your parents?" or "What does your family do?" or even "Where are you from?" without exposing just how odd my situation was. I was always the *different* girl. The mixed-race girl, the American who wasn't American, the girl whose mother had died, the girl with the absent father, the girl who made trouble in class, the girl who couldn't concentrate on her lessons. After a while one learns that blending in simply doesn't work. If people are going to single me out, I might as well give them something to stare at. Red stripes in my hair? Why not! Combat boots with the school uniform? Absolutely. Headmaster says, "I'll have to call your parents, young lady." I say, "Good luck." Carter didn't know anything about my life.

But enough of that. The point was, I decided to do this particular bit of exploring alone, and after a few wrong turns, I found my way back to the Hall of Ages.

What was I up to, you may ask? I certainly didn't want to meet Monsieur Evil again or creepy old Lord Salamander.

But I *did* want to see those images—*memories,* Zia had called them.

I pushed open the bronze doors. Inside, the hall seemed deserted. No balls of fire floated around the ceiling. No glowing hieroglyphs. But images still shimmered between the columns, washing the hall with strange, multicolored light.

I took a few nervous steps.

I wanted another look at the Age of the Gods. On our first trip through the hall, something about those images had shaken me. I knew Carter thought I'd gone into a dangerous trance, and Zia had warned that the scenes would melt my brain; but I had a feeling she was just trying to scare me off. I felt a connection to those images, like there was an answer within—a vital piece of information I needed.

I stepped off the carpet and approached the curtain of golden light. I saw sand dunes shifting in the wind, storm clouds brewing, crocodiles sliding down the Nile. I saw a vast hall full of revelers. I touched the image.

And I was in the palace of the gods.

Huge beings swirled around me, changing shape from human to animal to pure energy. On a throne in the center of the room sat a muscular African man in rich black robes. He had a handsome face and warm brown eyes. His hands looked strong enough to crush rocks.

The other gods celebrated round him. Music played—a sound so powerful that the air burned. At the man's side stood a beautiful woman in white, her belly swollen as if she were a few months pregnant. Her form flickered; at times she seemed to have multicolored wings. Then she turned in my direction and I gasped. She had my mother's face.

She didn't seem to notice me. In fact, none of the gods did, until a voice behind me said, "Are you a ghost?"

I turned and saw a good-looking boy of about sixteen, dressed in black robes. His complexion was pale, but he had lovely brown eyes like the man on the throne. His black hair was long and tousled—rather wild, but it worked for me. He tilted his head, and it finally occurred to me that he'd asked me a question.

I tried to think of something to say. Excuse me? Hello? Marry me? Anything would've done. But all I could manage was a shake of the head.

"Not a ghost, eh?" he mused. "A *ba* then?" He gestured towards the throne. "Watch, but do not interfere."

Somehow I wasn't interested in watching the throne so much, but the boy in black dissolved into a shadow and disappeared, leaving me no further distraction.

"Isis," said the man on the throne.

The pregnant woman turned towards him and beamed. "My lord Osiris. Happy birthday."

"Thank you, my love. And soon we shall mark the birth of our son—Horus, the great one! His new incarnation shall be his greatest yet. He shall bring peace and prosperity to the world."

Isis took her husband's hand. Music kept playing around them, gods celebrating, the very air

swirling in a dance of creation.

Suddenly the palace doors blew open. A hot wind made the torches sputter.

A man strode into the hall. He was tall and strong, almost a twin to Osiris, but with dark red skin, blood-colored robes, and a pointed beard. He looked human, except when he smiled. Then his teeth turned to fangs. His face flickered—sometimes human, sometimes strangely wolflike. I had to stifle a scream, because I'd seen that wolfish face before.

The dancing stopped. The music died.

Osiris rose from his throne. "Set," he said in a dangerous tone. "Why have you come?"

Set laughed, and the tension in the room broke. Despite his cruel eyes, he had a wonderful laugh—nothing like the screeching he'd done at the British Museum. It was carefree and friendly, as if he couldn't possibly mean any harm.

"I come to celebrate my brother's birthday, of course!" he exclaimed. "And I bring entertainment!"

He gestured behind him. Four huge men with the heads of wolves marched into the room, carrying a jewel-encrusted golden coffin.

My heart began to race. It was the same box Set had used to imprison my dad at the British Museum.

No! I wanted to scream. *Don't trust him!*

But the assembled gods oohed and aahed, admiring the box, which was painted with gold and red hieroglyphs, trimmed with jade and opals. The wolf-men set down the box, and I saw it had no lid. The interior was lined with black linen.

"This sleeping casket," Set announced, "was made by my finest craftsmen, using the most expensive materials. Its value is beyond measure. The god who lies within, even for a night, will see his powers increase tenfold! His wisdom will never falter. His strength will never fail. It is a gift"—he smiled slyly at Osiris—"for the *one and only* god who fits within perfectly!"

I wouldn't have queued up first, but the gods surged forward. They pushed each other out of the way to get at the golden coffin. Some climbed in but were too short. Others were much too big. Even when they tried to change their shapes, the gods had no luck, as if the magic of the box were thwarting them. No one fit exactly. Gods grumbled and complained as others, anxious to try, pushed them to the floor.

Set turned to Osiris with a good-natured laugh. "Well, brother, we have no winner yet. Will you try? Only the best of the gods can succeed."

Osiris's eyes gleamed. Apparently he wasn't the god of brains, because he seemed completely taken in by the box's beauty. All the other gods looked at him expectantly, and I could see what he was thinking: if he fit in the box, what a brilliant birthday present. Even Set, his wicked brother, would have to admit that he was the rightful king of the gods.

Only Isis seemed troubled. She laid her hand on her husband's shoulder. "My lord, do not. Set does not bring presents."

"I am offended!" Set sounded genuinely hurt. "Can I not celebrate my brother's birthday? Are we so estranged that I cannot even apologize to the king?"

Osiris smiled at Isis. "My dear, it is only a game. Fear nothing."

He rose from his throne. The gods applauded as he approached the box.

"All hail Osiris!" Set cried.

The king of the gods lowered himself into the box, and when he glanced in my direction, just for a moment, he had my father's face.

No! I thought again. *Don't do it!*

But Osiris lay down. The coffin fit him exactly.

A cheer went up from the gods, but before Osiris could rise, Set clapped his hands. A golden lid materialized above the box and slammed down on top of it.

Osiris shouted in rage, but his cries were muffled.

Golden latches fastened around the lid. The other gods surged forward to intervene—even the boy in black I'd seen earlier reappeared—but Set was faster. He stamped his foot so hard, the stone floor trembled. The gods toppled over each other like dominoes. The wolf-men drew their spears, and the gods scrambled away in terror.

Set said a magic word, and a boiling cauldron appeared out of thin air. It poured its contents over the coffin—molten lead, coating the box, sealing it shut, probably heating the interior to a thousand degrees.

"Villain!" Isis wailed. She advanced on Set and began to speak a spell, but Set held up his hand. Isis rose from the floor, clawing at her mouth, her lips pressed as if an invisible force were suffocating her.

"Not today, lovely Isis," Set purred. "Today, I am king. And your child shall never be born!"

Suddenly, another goddess—a slender woman in a blue dress—charged out of the crowd. "Husband, no!"

She tackled Set, who momentarily lost his concentration. Isis fell to the floor, gasping. The other goddess yelled, "Flee!"

Isis turned and ran.

Set rose. I thought he would hit the goddess in blue, but he only snarled. "Foolish wife! Whose side are you on?"

He stamped his foot again, and the golden coffin sank into the floor.

Set raced after Isis. At the edge of the palace, Isis turned into a small bird of prey and soared into the air. Set sprouted demon's wings and launched himself in pursuit.

Then suddenly *I* was the bird. I was Isis, flying desperately over the Nile. I could sense Set behind me—closing. Closing.

You must escape, the voice of Isis said in my mind. *Avenge Osiris. Crown Horus king!*

Just when I thought my heart would burst, I felt a hand on my shoulder. The images evaporated.

The old master, Iskandar, stood next to me, his face pinched with concern. Glowing hieroglyphs danced round him.

"Forgive the interruption," he said in perfect English. "But you were almost dead."

That's when my knees turned to water, and I lost consciousness.

When I awoke, I was curled at Iskandar's feet on the steps below the empty throne. We were alone in

the hall, which was mostly dark except for the light from the hieroglyphs that always seemed to glow around him.

"Welcome back," he said. "You're lucky you survived."

I wasn't so sure. My head felt like it had been boiled in oil.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to—"

"Look at the images? And yet you did. Your *ba* left your body and entered the past. Hadn't you been warned?"

"Yes," I admitted. "But…I was drawn to the pictures."

"Mmm." Iskandar stared into space, as if remembering something from long ago. "They *are* hard to resist."

"You speak perfect English," I noticed.

Iskandar smiled. "How do you know I'm speaking English? Perhaps you are speaking Greek."

I hoped he was kidding, but I couldn't tell. He seemed so frail and warm, and yet…it was like sitting next to a nuclear reactor. I had a feeling he was full of more danger than I wanted to know.

"You're not really *that* old, are you?" I asked. "I mean, old enough to remember Ptolemaic times?"

"I am *exactly* that old, my dear. I was born in the reign of Cleopatra VII."

"Oh, please."

"I assure you, it's true. It was my sorrow to behold the last days of Egypt, before that foolhardy queen lost our kingdom to the Romans. I was the last magician to be trained before the House went underground. Many of our most powerful secrets were lost, including the spells my master used to extend my life. Magicians these days still live long—sometimes centuries—but I have been alive for two millennia."

"So you're immortal?"

His chuckle turned into a racking cough. He doubled over and cupped his hands over his mouth. I wanted to help, but I wasn't sure how. The glowing hieroglyphs flickered and dimmed around him.

Finally the coughing subsided.

He took a shaky breath. "Hardly immortal, my dear. In fact…" His voice trailed off. "But never mind that. What did you see in your vision?"

I probably should've kept quiet. I didn't want to be turned into a bug for breaking any rules, and the vision had terrified me—especially the moment when I'd changed into the bird of prey. But Iskandar's kindly expression made it hard to hold back. I ended up telling him everything. Well, almost everything. I left out the bit about the good-looking boy, and yes, I know it was silly, but I was *embarrassed*. I reckoned that part could've been my own crazed imagination at work, as Ancient Egyptian gods could *not* have been that gorgeous.

Iskandar sat for a moment, tapping his staff against the steps. "You saw a very old event, Sadie—Set taking the throne of Egypt by force. He hid Osiris's coffin, you know, and Isis searched the entire world to find it."

"So she got him back eventually?"

"Not exactly. Osiris was resurrected—but only in the Underworld. He became the king of the

dead. When their son, Horus, grew up, Horus challenged Set for the throne of Egypt and won after many hard battles. That is why Horus was called the Avenger. As I said—an old story, but one that the gods have repeated many times in our history."

"Repeated?"

"The gods follow patterns. In some ways they are quite predictable: acting out the same squabbles, the same jealousies down through the ages. Only the settings change, and the hosts."

There was that word again: *hosts*. I thought about the poor woman in the New York museum who'd turned into the goddess Serqet.

"In my vision," I said, "Isis and Osiris were married. Horus was about to be born as their son. But in another story Carter told me, all three of them were siblings, children of the sky goddess."

"Yes," Iskandar agreed. "This can be confusing for those who do not know the nature of gods. They cannot walk the earth in their pure form—at least, not for more than a few moments. They must have hosts."

"Humans, you mean."

"Or powerful objects, such as statues, amulets, monuments, certain models of cars. But they *prefer* human form. You see gods have great power, but only humans have creativity, the power to change history rather than simply repeat it. Humans can…how do you moderns say it…think outside the cup."

"The box," I suggested.

"Yes. The combination of human creativity and godly power can be quite formidable. At any rate, when Osiris and Isis first walked the earth, their hosts were brother and sister. But mortal hosts are not permanent. They die, they wear out. Later in history, Osiris and Isis took new forms—humans who were husband and wife. Horus, who in one lifetime was their brother, was born into a new life as their son."

"That's confusing," I said. "And a little gross."

Iskandar shrugged. "The gods do not think of relationships the way we humans do. Their hosts are merely like changes of clothes. This is why the ancient stories seem so mixed up. Sometimes the gods are described as married, or siblings, or parent and child, depending on their hosts. The pharaoh himself was called a living god, you know. Egyptologists believe this was just a lot of propaganda, but in fact it was often literally true. The greatest of the pharaohs became hosts for gods, usually Horus. He gave them power and wisdom, and let them build Egypt into a mighty empire."

"But that's good, isn't it? Why is it against the law to host a god?"

Iskandar's face darkened. "Gods have different agendas than humans do, Sadie. They can overpower their hosts, literally burn them out. That is why so many hosts die young. Tutankhamen, poor boy, died at nineteen. Cleopatra VII was even worse. She tried to host the spirit of Isis without knowing what she was doing, and it shattered her mind. In the old days, the House of Life taught the use of divine magic. Initiates could study the path of Horus, or Isis, or Sekhmet, or any number of gods, learning to channel their powers. We had many more initiates back then."

Iskandar looked round the empty hall, as if imagining it filled with magicians. "Some adepts could call upon the gods only from time to time. Others attempted to host their spirits…with varying degrees of success. The ultimate goal was to become the 'eye' of the god—a perfect union of the two souls, mortal and immortal. Very few achieved this, even among the pharaohs, who were born to the

task. Many destroyed themselves trying." He turned up his palm, which had the most deeply etched lifeline I'd ever seen. "When Egypt finally fell to the Romans, it became clear to us—to *me*—that mankind, our rulers, even the strongest magicians, no longer had the strength of will to master a god's power. The only ones who could…" His voice faltered.

"What?"

"Nothing, my dear. I talk too much. An old man's weakness."

"It's the blood of the pharaohs, isn't it?"

He fixed me in his gaze. His eyes no longer looked milky. They burned with intensity. "You are a remarkable young girl. You remind me of your mother."

My mouth fell open. "You knew her?"

"Of course. She trained here, as did your father. Your mother…well, aside from being a brilliant scientist, she had the gift of divination. One of the most difficult forms of magic, and she was the first in centuries to possess it."

"Divination?"

"Seeing the future. Tricky business, never perfect, but she saw things that made her seek advice from…*unconventional* places, things that made even *this* old man question some long-held beliefs…"

He drifted off into Memoryland again, which was infuriating enough when my grandparents did it, but when it's an all-powerful magician who has valuable information, it's enough to drive one mad.

"Iskandar?"

He looked at me with mild surprise, as if he'd forgotten I was there. "I'm sorry, Sadie. I should come to the point: you have a hard path ahead of you, but I'm convinced now it's a path you must take, for all our sakes. Your brother will need your guidance."

I was tempted to laugh. "Carter, need my guidance? For what? What path do you mean?"

"All in good time. Things must take their course."

Typical adult answer. I tried to bite back my frustration. "And what if *I* need guidance?"

"Zia," he said, without hesitation. "She is my best pupil, and she is wise. When the time comes, she will know how to help you."

"Right," I said, a bit disappointed. "Zia."

"For now you should rest, my dear. And it seems I, too, can rest at last." He sounded sad but relieved. I didn't know what he was talking about, but he didn't give me the chance to ask.

"I am sorry our time together was so brief," he said. "Sleep well, Sadie Kane."

"But—"

Iskandar touched my forehead. And I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

SADIE

16. How Zia Lost Her Eyebrows

I WOKE TO A BUCKET OF ICE WATER IN MY FACE.

"Sadie! Get up," Zia said.

"God!" I yelled. "Was that *necessary*?"

"No," Zia admitted.

I wanted to strangle her, except I was dripping wet, shivering, and still disoriented. How long had I slept? It felt like only a few minutes, but the dormitory was empty. All the other cots were made. The girls must've already gone to their morning lessons.

Zia tossed me a towel and some fresh linen clothes. "We'll meet Carter in the cleansing room."

"I just *got* a bath, thanks very much. What I need is a proper breakfast."

"The cleansing prepares you for magic." Zia slung her bag of tricks over her shoulder and unfolded the long black staff she'd used in New York. "If you survive, we'll see about food."

I was tired of being reminded that I might die, but I got dressed and followed her out.

After another endless series of tunnels, we came to a chamber with a roaring waterfall. There was no ceiling, just a shaft above us that seemed to go up forever. Water fell from the darkness into a fountain, splashing over a five-meter-tall statue of that bird-headed god. What was his name—Tooth? No, Thoth. The water cascaded over his head, collected in his palms, then spilled out into the pool.

Carter stood beside the fountain. He was dressed in linen with Dad's workbag over one shoulder and his sword strapped to his back. His hair was rumpled, as if he hadn't slept well. At least he hadn't been doused in ice water. Seeing him, I felt a strange sense of relief. I thought about Iskandar's words last night: *Your brother will need your guidance.*

"What?" Carter asked. "You're staring at me funny."

"Nothing," I said quickly. "How'd you sleep?"

"Badly. I'll…I'll tell you about it later."

Was it my imagination, or did he frown in Zia's direction? *Hmm,* possible romantic trouble between Miss Magic and my brother? I made a mental note to interrogate him next time we were alone.

Zia went to a nearby cabinet. She brought out two ceramic cups, dipped them into the fountain, then offered them to us. "Drink."

I glanced at Carter. "After you."

"It's only water," Zia assured me, "but purified by contact with Thoth. It will focus your mind."

I didn't see how a statue could purify water. Then I remembered what Iskandar had said, how

gods could inhabit anything.

I took a drink. Immediately I felt like I'd had a good strong cup of Gran's tea. My brain buzzed. My eyesight sharpened. I felt so hyperactive, I almost didn't miss my chewing gum—almost.

Carter sipped from his cup. "Wow."

"Now the tattoos," Zia announced.

"Brilliant!" I said.

"On your tongue," she added.

"Excuse me?"

Zia stuck out her tongue. Right in the middle was a blue hieroglyph.

"Nith ith Naat," she tried to say with her tongue out. Then she realized her mistake and stuck her tongue back in. "I mean, this is Ma'at, the symbol of order and harmony. It will help you speak magic clearly. One mistake with a spell—"

"Let me guess," I said. "We'll die."

From her cabinet of horrors, Zia produced a fine-tipped paintbrush and a bowl of blue dye. "It doesn't hurt. And it's not permanent."

"How does it taste?" Carter wondered.

Zia smiled. "Stick out your tongue."

To answer Carter's question, the tattoo tasted like burning car tires.

"Ugh." I spit a blue gob of "order and harmony" into the fountain. "Never mind breakfast. Lost my appetite."

Zia pulled a leather satchel out of the cabinet. "Carter will be allowed to keep your father's magic implements, plus a new staff and wand. Generally speaking, the wand is for defense, the staff is for offense, although, Carter, you may prefer to use your *khopesh*."

"Khopesh?"

"The curved sword," Zia said. "A favored weapon of the pharaoh's guard. It can be used in combat magic. As for Sadie, you will need a full kit."

"How come *he* gets Dad's kit?" I complained.

"He is the eldest," she said, as if that explained everything. Typical.

Zia tossed me the leather satchel. Inside was an ivory wand, a rod that I supposed turned into a staff, some paper, an ink set, a bit of twine, and a lovely chunk of wax. I was less than thrilled.

"What about a little wax man?" I asked. "I want a Doughboy."

"If you mean a figurine, you must make one yourself. You will be taught how, if you have the skill. We will determine your specialty later."

"Specialty?" Carter asked. "You mean like Nectanebo specialized in statues?"

Zia nodded. "Nectanebo was extremely skilled in statuary magic. He could make *shabti* so lifelike, they could pass for human. No one has ever been greater at statuary…except perhaps Iskandar. But there are many other disciplines: Healer. Amulet maker. Animal charmer. Elementalist. Combat magician. Necromancer."

"Diviner?" I asked.

Zia looked at me curiously. "Yes, although that is quite rare. Why do you—"

I cleared my throat. "So how do we know our specialty?"

"It will become clear soon enough," Zia promised, "but a good magician knows a bit of everything, which is why we start with a basic test. Let us go to the library."

The First Nome's library was like Amos's, but a hundred times bigger, with circular rooms lined with honeycomb shelves that seemed to go on forever, like the world's largest beehive. Clay *shabti* statues kept popping in and out, retrieving scroll canisters and disappearing, but we saw no other people.

Zia brought us to a wooden table and spread out a long, blank papyrus scroll. She picked up a stylus and dipped it in ink.

"The Egyptian word *shesh* means scribe or writer, but it can also mean magician. This is because magic, at its most basic, turns words into reality. You will create a scroll. Using your own magic, you will send power into the words on paper. When spoken, the words will unleash the magic."

She handed the stylus to Carter.

"I don't get it," he protested.

"A simple word," she suggested. "It can be anything."

"In English?"

Zia curled her lip. "If you must. Any language will work, but hieroglyphics are best. They are the language of creation, of magic, of Ma'at. You must be careful, however."

Before she could explain, Carter drew a simple hieroglyph of a bird.

The picture wriggled, peeled itself off the papyrus, and flew away. It splattered Carter's head with some hieroglyphic droppings on its way out. I couldn't help laughing at Carter's expression.

"A beginner's mistake," Zia said, scowling at me to be quiet. "If you use a symbol that stands for something alive, it is wise to write it only partially—leave off a wing, or the legs. Otherwise the magic you channel could make it come alive."

"And poop on its creator." Carter sighed, wiping off his hair with a bit of scrap papyrus. "That's why our father's wax statue, Doughboy, has no legs, right?"

"The same principle," Zia agreed. "Now, try again."

Carter stared at Zia's staff, which was covered in hieroglyphics. He picked the most obvious one and copied it on the papyrus—the symbol for fire.

Uh-oh, I thought. But the word did not come alive, which would've been rather exciting. It simply dissolved.

"Keep trying," Zia urged.

"Why am I so tired?" Carter wondered.

He definitely looked exhausted. His face was beaded with sweat.

"You're channeling magic from within," Zia said. "For me, fire is easy. But it may not be the most natural type of magic for you. Try something else. Summon…summon a sword."

Zia showed him how to form the hieroglyph, and Carter wrote it on the papyrus. Nothing happened.

"Speak it," Zia said.

"Sword," Carter said. The word glowed and vanished, and a butter knife lay on the papyrus.

I laughed. "Terrifying!"

Carter looked like he was about to pass out, but he managed a grin. He picked up the knife and threatened to poke me with it.

"Very good for a first time," Zia said. "Remember, you are not creating the knife yourself. You are summoning it from Ma'at—the creative power of the universe. Hieroglyphs are the code we use. That's why they are called Divine Words. The more powerful the magician, the easier it becomes to control the language."

I caught my breath. "Those hieroglyphs floating in the Hall of Ages. They seemed to gather around Iskandar. Was he summoning them?"

"Not exactly," Zia said. "His presence is so strong, he makes the language of the universe visible simply by being in the room. No matter what our specialty, each magician's greatest hope is to become a speaker of the Divine Words—to know the language of creation so well that we can fashion reality simply by speaking, not even using a scroll."

"Like saying *shatter,*" I ventured. "And having a door explode."

Zia scowled. "Yes, but such a thing would take years of practice."

"Really? Well—"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Carter shaking his head, silently warning me to shut up.

"Um…" I stammered. "Some day, I'll learn to do that."

Zia raised an eyebrow. "First, master the scroll."

I was getting tired of her attitude, so I picked up the stylus and wrote *Fire* in English.

Zia leaned forward and frowned. "You shouldn't—"

Before she could finish, a column of flame erupted in her face. I screamed, sure I'd done something horrible, but when the fire died Zia was still there, looking astonished, her eyebrows singed and her bangs smoldering.

"Oh, god," I said. "Sorry, sorry. Do I die now?"

For three heartbeats, Zia stared at me.

"Now," she announced. "I think you are ready to duel."

We used another magic gateway, which Zia summoned right on the library wall. We stepped into a circle of swirling sand and popped out the other side, covered in dust and grit, in the front of some ruins. The harsh sunlight almost blinded me.

"I hate portals," Carter muttered, brushing the sand out of his hair.

Then he looked around and his eyes widened. "This is Luxor! That's, like, hundreds of miles south of Cairo."

I sighed. "And that amazes you after teleporting from New York?"

He was too busy checking out our surroundings to answer.

I suppose the ruins were all right, though once you've seen one pile of crumbly Egyptian stuff, you've seen them all, I say. We stood on a wide avenue flanked by human-headed beasties, most of

which were broken. The road went on behind us as far as I could see, but in front of us it ended at a temple much bigger than the one in the New York museum.

The walls were at least six stories high. Big stone pharaohs stood guard on either side of the entrance, and a single obelisk stood on the left-hand side. It looked as if one used to stand on the right as well, but it was now gone.

"Luxor is a modern name," Zia said. "This was once the city of Thebes. This temple was one of the most important in Egypt. It is the best place for us to practice."

"Because it's already destroyed?" I asked.

Zia gave me one of her famous scowls. "No, Sadie—because it is still full of magic. And it was sacred to your family."

"Our family?" Carter asked.

Zia didn't explain, as usual. She just gestured for us to follow.

"I don't like those ugly sphinxes," I mumbled as we walked down the path.

"Those ugly sphinxes are creatures of law and order," Zia said, "protectors of Egypt. They are on *our* side."

"If you say so."

Carter nudged me as we passed the obelisk. "You know the missing one is in Paris."

I rolled my eyes. "Thank you, Mr. Wikipedia. I thought they were in New York and London."

"That's a different pair," Carter said, like I was supposed to care. "The other *Luxor* obelisk is in Paris."

"Wish I was in Paris," I said. "Lot better than this place."

We walked into a dusty courtyard surrounded by crumbling pillars and statues with various missing body parts. Still, I could tell the place had once been quite impressive.

"Where are the people?" I asked. "Middle of the day, winter holidays. Shouldn't there be loads of tourists?"

Zia made a distasteful expression. "Usually, yes. I have encouraged them to stay away for a few hours."

"How?"

"Common minds are easy to manipulate." She looked pointedly at me, and I remembered how she'd forced me to talk in the New York museum. Oh, yes, she was just *begging* for more scorched eyebrows.

"Now, to the duel." She summoned her staff and drew two circles in the sand about ten meters apart. She directed me to stand in one of them and Carter in the other.

"I've got to duel *him*?" I asked.

I found the idea preposterous. The only thing Carter had shown aptitude for was summoning butter knives and pooping birds. Well, all right, and that bit on the chasm bridge deflecting the daggers, but still—what if I hurt him? As annoying as Carter might be, I didn't want to accidentally summon that glyph I'd made in Amos's house and explode him to bits.

Perhaps Carter was thinking the same thing, because he'd started to sweat. "What if we do something wrong?" he asked.

"I will oversee the duel," Zia promised. "We will start slowly. The first magician to knock the other out of his or her circle wins."

"But we haven't been trained!" I protested.

"One learns by doing," Zia said. "This is not school, Sadie. You cannot learn magic by sitting at a desk and taking notes. You can only learn magic by doing magic."

"But—"

"Summon whatever power you can," Zia said. "Use whatever you have available. Begin!"

I looked at Carter doubtfully. *Use whatever I have?* I opened the leather satchel and looked inside. A lump of wax? Probably not. I drew the wand and rod. Immediately, the rod expanded until I was holding a two-meter-long white staff.

Carter drew his sword, though I couldn't imagine what he'd do with it. Rather hard to hit me from ten meters away.

I wanted this over, so I raised my staff like I'd seen Zia do. I thought the word *Fire.*

A small flame sputtered to life on the end of the staff. I willed it to get bigger. The fire momentarily brightened, but then my eyesight went fuzzy. The flame died. I fell to my knees, feeling as if I'd run a marathon.

"You okay?" Carter called.

"No," I complained.

"If she knocks herself out, do I win?" he asked.

"Shut up!" I said.

"Sadie, you must be careful," Zia called. "You drew from your own reserves, not from the staff. You can quickly deplete your magic."

I got shakily to my feet. "Explain?"

"A magician begins a duel full of magic, the way you might be full after a good meal—"

"Which I never got," I reminded her.

"Each time you do magic," Zia continued, "you expend energy. You can draw energy from *yourself,* but you must know your limits. Otherwise you could exhaust yourself, or worse."

I swallowed and looked at my smoldering staff. "How much worse?"

"You could literally burn up."

I hesitated, thinking how to ask my next question without saying too much. "But I've done magic before. Sometimes it doesn't exhaust me. Why?"

From around her neck, Zia unclasped an amulet. She threw it into the air, and with a flash it turned into a giant vulture. The massive black bird soared over the ruins. As soon as it was out of sight, Zia extended her hand and the amulet appeared in her palm.

"Magic can be drawn from many sources," she said. "It can be stored in scrolls, wands, or staffs. Amulets are especially powerful. Magic can also be drawn straight from Ma'at, using the Divine Words, but this is difficult. Or"—she locked eyes with me—"it can be summoned from the gods."

"Why are you looking at me?" I demanded. *"I* didn't summon any gods. They just seem to *find* me!"

She put on her necklace but said nothing.

"Hold on," Carter said. "You claimed this place was sacred to our family."

"It was," Zia agreed.

"But wasn't this…" Carter frowned. "Didn't the pharaohs have a yearly festival here or something?"

"Indeed," she said. "The pharaoh would walk down the processional path all the way from Karnak to Luxor. He would enter the temple and become one with the gods. Sometimes, this was purely ceremonial. Sometimes, with the great pharaohs like Ramesses, here—" Zia pointed to one of the huge crumbling statues.

"They actually hosted the gods," I interrupted, remembering what Iskandar had said.

Zia narrowed her eyes. "And yet you claim to know nothing of your family's past."

"Wait a second," Carter protested. "You're saying we're related to—"

"The gods choose their hosts carefully," Zia said. "They always prefer the blood of the pharaohs. When a magician has the blood of *two* royal families…"

I exchanged looks with Carter. Something Bast said came back to me: "Your family was born to magic." And Amos had told us that both sides of our family had a complicated history with the gods, and that Carter and I were the most powerful children to be born in centuries. A bad feeling settled over me, like an itchy blanket prickling against my skin.

"Our parents were from different royal lines," I said. "Dad…he must've been descended from Narmer, the first pharaoh. I told you he looked like that picture!"

"That's not possible," Carter said. "That was five thousand years ago." But I could see his mind was racing. "Then the Fausts…" He turned to Zia. "Ramesses the Great built this courtyard. You're telling me our mom's family is descended from him?"

Zia sighed. "Don't tell me your parents kept this from you. Why do you think you are so dangerous to us?"

"You think we're hosting gods," I said, absolutely stunned. "That's what you're worried about—just because of something our great-times-a-thousand grandparents did? That's completely daft."

"Then prove it!" Zia said. "Duel, and show me how weak your magic is!"

She turned her back on us, as if we were completely unimportant.

Something inside me snapped. I'd had the worst two days ever. I'd lost my father, my home, and my cat, been attacked by monsters and had ice water dumped on my head. Now this *witch* was turning her back on me. She didn't want to train us. She wanted to see how dangerous we were.

Well, fine.

"Um, Sadie?" Carter called. He must've seen from my expression that I was beyond reason.

I focused on my staff. *Maybe not fire. Cats have always liked me. Maybe…*

I threw my staff straight at Zia. It hit the ground at her heels and immediately transformed into a snarling she-lion. Zia whirled in surprise, but then everything went wrong.

The lion turned and charged at Carter, as if she knew I was supposed to be dueling him.

I had a split second to think: *What have I done?*

Then the cat lunged…and Carter's form flickered. He rose off the ground, surrounded by a

golden holographic shell like the one Bast had used, except that his giant image was a warrior with the head of a falcon. Carter swung his sword, and the falcon warrior did likewise, slicing the lion with a shimmering blade of energy. The cat dissolved in midair, and my staff clattered to the ground, cut neatly in half.

Carter's avatar shimmered, then disappeared. He dropped to the ground and grinned. "Fun."

He didn't even look tired. Once I got over my relief that I hadn't killed him, I realized I didn't feel tired either. If anything, I had *more* energy.

I turned defiantly to Zia. "Well? Better, right?"

Her face was ashen. "The falcon. He—he summoned—"

Before she could finish, footsteps pounded on the stones. A young initiate raced into the courtyard, looking panicked. Tears streaked his dusty face. He said something to Zia in hurried Arabic. When Zia got his message, she sat down hard in the sand. She covered her face and began to tremble.

Carter and I left our dueling circles and ran to her.

"Zia?" Carter said. "What's wrong?"

She took a deep breath, trying to gather her composure. When she looked up, her eyes were red. She said something to the adept, who nodded and ran back the way he'd come.

"News from the First Nome," she said shakily. "Iskandar…" Her voice broke.

I felt as if a giant fist had punched me in the stomach. I thought about Iskandar's strange words last night: *It seems I, too, can rest at last.* "He's dead, isn't he? That's what he meant."

Zia stared at me. "What do you mean: 'That's what he meant'?"

"I…" I was about to say that I'd spoken with Iskandar the night before. Then I realized this might not be a good thing to mention. "Nothing. How did it happen?"

"In his sleep," Zia said. "He—he had been ailing for years, of course. But still…"

"It's okay," Carter said. "I know he was important to you."

She wiped at her tears, then rose unsteadily. "You don't understand. Desjardins is next in line. As soon as he is named Chief Lector, he will order you executed."

"But we haven't done anything!" I said.

Zia's eyes flashed with anger. "You still don't realize how dangerous you are? You are hosting gods."

"Ridiculous," I insisted, but an uneasy feeling was building inside me. If it were true…no, it couldn't be! Besides, how could anyone, even a poxy old nutter like Desjardins, seriously execute children for something they weren't even aware of?

"He will order me to bring you in," Zia warned, "and I will have to obey."

"You can't!" Carter cried. "You *saw* what happened in the museum. We're not the problem. Set is. And if Desjardins isn't taking that seriously…well, maybe he's part of the problem too."

Zia gripped her staff. I was sure she was going to fry us with a fireball, but she hesitated.

"Zia." I decided to take a risk. "Iskandar talked with me last night. He caught me sneaking around the Hall of Ages."

She looked at me in shock. I reckoned I had only seconds before that shock turned to anger.

“He said you were his best pupil,” I recalled. “He said you were wise. He also said Carter and I have a difficult path ahead of us, and you would know how to help us when the time came.”

Her staff smoldered. Her eyes reminded me of glass about to shatter.

“Desjardins will kill us,” I persisted. “Do you think that’s what Iskandar had in mind?”

I counted to five, six, seven. Just when I was sure she was going to blast us, she lowered her staff. “Use the obelisk.”

“What?” I asked.

“The obelisk at the entrance, fool! You have five minutes, perhaps less, before Desjardins sends orders for your execution. Flee, and destroy Set. The Demon Days begin at sundown. All portals will stop working. You need to get as close as possible to Set before that happens.”

“Hold on,” I said. “I meant you should come with us and help us! We can’t even use an obelisk, much less destroy Set!”

“I cannot betray the House,” she said. “You have four minutes now. If you can’t operate the obelisk, you’ll die.”

That was enough incentive for me. I started to drag Carter off, but Zia called: “Sadie?”

When I looked back, Zia’s eyes were full of bitterness.

“Desjardins will order me to hunt you down,” she warned. “Do you understand?”

Unfortunately, I did. The next time we met, we would be enemies.

I grabbed Carter’s hand and ran.

17. A Bad Trip to Paris

OKAY, BEFORE I GET TO THE demon fruit bats, I should back up.

The night before we fled Luxor, I didn't get much sleep—first because of an out-of-body experience, then a run-in with Zia. [Stop smirking, Sadie. It wasn't a *good* run-in.]

After lights out, I tried to sleep. Honest. I even used the stupid magic headrest they gave me instead of a pillow, but it didn't help. As soon as I managed to shut my eyes, my *ba* decided to take a little trip.

Just like before, I felt myself floating above my body, taking on a winged form. Then the current of the Duat swept me away at blurring speed. When my vision cleared, I found myself in a dark cavern. Uncle Amos was sneaking through it, finding his way with a faint blue light that flickered on the top of his staff. I wanted to call to him, but my voice didn't work. I'm not sure how he could miss me, floating a few feet away in glowing chicken form, but apparently I was invisible to him.

He stepped forward and the ground at his feet suddenly blazed to life with a red hieroglyph. Amos cried out, but his mouth froze half open. Coils of light wrapped around his legs like vines. Soon red tendrils completely entwined him, and Amos stood petrified, his unblinking eyes staring straight ahead.

I tried to fly to him, but I was stuck in place, floating helplessly, so I could only observe.

Laughter echoed through the cavern. A horde of *things* emerged from the darkness—toad creatures, animal-headed demons, and even stranger monsters half hidden in the gloom. They'd been lying in ambush, I realized—waiting for Amos. In front of them appeared a fiery silhouette—Set, but his form was much clearer now, and this time it wasn't human. His body was emaciated, slimy, and black, and his head was that of a feral beast.

"Bon soir, Amos," Set said. "How nice of you to come. We're going to have so much fun!"

I sat bolt upright in bed, back in my own body, with my heart pounding.

Amos had been captured. I knew it for certain. And even worse… Set had known somehow that Amos was coming. I thought back to something Bast had said, about how the serpopards had broken in to the mansion. She'd said the defenses had been sabotaged, and only a magician of the House could've done it. A horrible suspicion started building inside me.

I stared into the dark for a long time, listening to the little kid next to me mumbling spells in his sleep. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I opened the door with a push of my mind, the way I'd done at Amos's mansion, and I sneaked out.

I was wandering through the empty marketplace, thinking about Dad and Amos, replaying the events over and over, trying to figure out what I could've done differently to save them, when I

spotted Zia.

She was hurrying across the courtyard as if she were being chased, but what really caught my attention was the shimmering black cloud around her, as if someone had wrapped her in a glittery shadow. She came to a section of blank wall and waved her hand. Suddenly a doorway appeared. Zia glanced nervously behind her and ducked inside.

Of course I followed.

I moved quietly up to the doorway. I could hear Zia's voice inside, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. Then the doorway began to solidify, turning back into a wall, and I made a split-second decision. I jumped through.

Inside, Zia was alone with her back to me. She was kneeling at a stone altar, chanting something under her breath. The walls were decorated with Ancient Egyptian drawings and modern photographs.

The glittery shadow no longer surrounded Zia, but something even stranger was happening. I'd been planning to tell Zia about my nightmare, but that went completely out of my thoughts when I saw what she was doing. She cupped her palms, the way you might hold a bird, and a glowing blue sphere appeared, about the size of a golf ball. Still chanting, she raised her hands. The sphere flew up, straight through the ceiling, and vanished.

Some instinct told me this was *not* something I was supposed to see.

I thought about backing out of the room. Only problem: the door was gone. No other exits. It was only a matter of time before—*Uh-oh.*

Maybe I'd made a noise. Maybe her magical senses had kicked in. But faster than I could react, Zia pulled her wand and turned on me, flames flickering down the edge of the boomerang.

"Hi," I said nervously.

Her expression turned from anger to surprise, then back to anger. "Carter, what are you doing here?"

"Just walking around. I saw you in the courtyard, so—"

"What do you mean you *saw* me?"

"Well…you were running, and you had this black shimmery stuff around you, and—"

"You *saw* that? Impossible."

"Why? What was it?"

She dropped her wand and the fire died. "I don't appreciate being followed, Carter."

"Sorry. I thought you might be in trouble."

She started to say something, but apparently changed her mind. "In trouble…that's true enough."

She sat down heavily and sighed. In the candlelight, her amber eyes looked dark and sad.

She stared at the photos behind the altar, and I realized she was in some of them. There she was as a little girl, standing barefoot outside a mud-brick house, squinting resentfully at the camera as if she didn't want her picture taken. Next to that, a wider shot showed a whole village on the Nile—the kind of place my dad took me to sometimes, where nothing had changed much in the last two thousand years. A crowd of villagers grinned and waved at the camera as if they were celebrating, and above them little Zia rode on the shoulders of a man who must've been her father. Another photo was a family shot: Zia holding hands with her mother and father. They could've been any *fellahin* family

anywhere in Egypt, but her dad had especially kindly, twinkling eyes—I thought he must have a good sense of humor. Her mom's face was unveiled, and she laughed as if her husband had just cracked a joke.

"Your folks look cool," I said. "Is that home?"

Zia seemed like she wanted to get angry, but she kept her emotions under control. Or maybe she just didn't have the energy. "It *was* my home. The village no longer exists."

I waited, not sure I dared to ask. We locked eyes, and I could tell she was deciding how much to tell me.

"My father was a farmer," she said, "but he also worked for archaeologists. In his spare time he'd scour the desert for artifacts and new sites where they might want to dig."

I nodded. What Zia described was pretty common. Egyptians have been making extra money that way for centuries.

"One night when I was eight, my father found a statue," she said. "Small but very rare: a statue of a monster, carved from red stone. It had been buried in a pit with a lot of other statues that were all smashed. But somehow this one survived. He brought it home. He didn't know… He didn't realize magicians imprison monsters and spirits inside such statues, and break them to destroy their essence. My father brought the unbroken statue into our village, and…and accidentally unleashed…"

Her voice faltered. She stared at the picture of her father smiling and holding her hand.

"Zia, I'm sorry."

She knit her eyebrows. "Iskandar found me. He and the other magicians destroyed the monster… but not in time. They found me curled in a fire pit under some reeds where my mother had hidden me. I was the only survivor."

I tried to imagine how Zia would've looked when Iskandar found her—a little girl who'd lost everything, alone in the ruins of her village. It was hard to picture her that way.

"So this room is a shrine to your family," I guessed. "You come here to remember them."

Zia looked at me blankly. "That's the problem, Carter. I *can't* remember. Iskandar tells me about my past. He gave me these pictures, explained what happened. But…I have no memory at all."

I was about to say, "You were only eight." Then I realized I'd been the same age when my mom died, when Sadie and I were split up. I remembered all of that so clearly. I could still see our house in Los Angeles and the way the stars looked at night from our back porch overlooking the ocean. My dad would tell us wild stories about the constellations. Then every night before bed, Sadie and I would cuddle up with Mom on the sofa, fighting for her attention, and she'd tell us not to believe a word of Dad's stories. She'd explain the science behind the stars, talk about physics and chemistry as if we were her college students. Looking back on it, I wondered if she'd been trying to warn us: Don't believe in those gods and myths. They're too dangerous.

I remembered our last trip to London as a family, how nervous Mom and Dad seemed on the plane. I remembered our dad coming back to our grandparents' flat after Mom had died, and telling us there had been an accident. Even before he explained, I knew it was bad, because I'd never seen my dad cry before.

The little details that *did* fade drove me crazy—like the smell of Mom's perfume, or the way her voice sounded. The older I got, the harder I held on to those things. I couldn't imagine not remembering anything. How could Zia stand it?

"Maybe…" I struggled to find the right words. "Maybe you just—"

She held up her hand. "Carter, believe me. I've tried to remember. It's no use. Iskandar is the only family I've ever had."

"What about friends?"

Zia stared at me as if I'd used a foreign term. I realized I hadn't seen anyone close to our age in the First Nome. Everyone was either much younger or much older.

"I don't have time for friends," she said. "Besides, when initiates turn thirteen, they're assigned to other nomes around the world. I am the only one who stayed here. I like being alone. It's fine."

The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. I'd said almost the same thing, many times, when people asked me what it was like being homeschooled by my dad. Didn't I miss having friends? Didn't I want a normal life? "I like being alone. It's fine."

I tried to picture Zia going to a regular public high school, learning a locker combination, hanging out in the cafeteria. I couldn't picture it. I imagined she would be as lost as I would.

"Tell you what," I said. "After the testing, after the Demon Days, when things settle down—"

"Things won't settle down."

"—I'm going to take you to the mall."

She blinked. "The mall? For what reason?"

"To hang out," I said. "We'll get some hamburgers. See a movie."

Zia hesitated. "Is this what you'd call a 'date'?"

My expression must've been priceless, because Zia actually cracked a smile. "You look like a cow hit with a shovel."

"I didn't mean…I just meant…"

She laughed, and suddenly it was easier to imagine her as a regular high school kid.

"I will look forward to this *mall,* Carter," she said. "You are either a very interesting person… or a very dangerous one."

"Let's go with interesting."

She waved her hand, and the door reappeared. "Go now. And be careful. The next time you sneak up on me, you might not be so fortunate."

At the doorway, I turned. "Zia, what was that black shimmery stuff?"

Her smile faded. "An invisibility spell. Only very powerful magicians are able to see through it. *You* should not have."

She stared at me for answers, but I didn't have any.

"Maybe it was…wearing off or something," I managed. "And, can I ask, the blue sphere?"

She frowned. "The what?"

"The thing you released that went into the ceiling."

She looked mystified. "I…I don't know what you mean. Perhaps the candlelight was playing tricks on your eyes."

Awkward silence. Either she was lying to me, or I was going crazy, or…I didn't know what. I realized I hadn't told her about my vision of Amos and Set, but I felt that I'd already pushed her as far

as I could for one night.

"Okay," I said. "Good night."

I made my way back to the dorm, but I didn't get to sleep again for a long time.

Fast-forward to Luxor. Maybe now you understand why I didn't want to leave Zia behind, and why I didn't believe Zia would actually hurt us.

On the other hand, I knew she wasn't lying about Desjardins. That guy wouldn't think twice about turning us into escargots. And the fact that Set had spoken French in my dream—"*Bon soir*, Amos." Was that just a coincidence…or was something a *lot* worse going on?

Anyway, when Sadie tugged on my arm, I followed.

We ran out of the temple and headed for the obelisk. But naturally, it wasn't that simple. We're the Kane family. Nothing is *ever* that simple.

Just as we reached the obelisk, I heard the *slish*-ing sound of a magic portal. About a hundred yards down the path, a bald magician in white robes stepped out of a whirling sand vortex.

"Hurry," I told Sadie. I grabbed the staff-rod from my bag and threw it to her. "Since I cut yours in half. I'll stick with the sword."

"But I don't know what I'm doing!" she protested, searching the obelisk's base as if she hoped to find a secret switch.

The magician regained his balance and spit the sand out of his mouth. Then he spotted us. "Stop!"

"Yeah," I muttered. "That's gonna happen."

"Paris." Sadie turned to me. "You said the other obelisk is in Paris, right?"

"Right. *Um,* not to rush you, but…"

The magician raised his staff and started chanting.

I fumbled for the hilt of my sword. My legs felt like they were turning to butter. I wondered if I could pull off that hawk warrior thing again. That had been cool, but it had also been just a duel. And the test at the chasm bridge, when I'd deflected those daggers—that hadn't seemed like *me.* Every time I'd drawn this sword so far, I'd had help: Zia had been there, or Bast. I'd never felt completely alone. This time, it was just me. I was crazy to think I could hold off a full-fledged magician. I was no warrior. Everything I knew about swords came from reading books—the history of Alexander the Great, *The Three Musketeers*—as if that could help! With Sadie occupied at the obelisk, I was on my own.

No you're not, said a voice inside me.

Great, I thought. *I'm on my own* and *going crazy.*

At the far end of the avenue, the magician called out: "Serve the House of Life!"

But I got the feeling he wasn't talking to me.

The air between us began to shimmer. Waves of heat flowed from the double lines of sphinxes, making them look as if they *were* moving. Then I realized they were moving. Each one cracked down the middle, and ghostly apparitions appeared from the stone like locusts breaking out of their shells. Not all of them were in good shape. The spirit creatures from broken statues had missing heads or feet. Some limped along on only three legs. But at least a dozen attack sphinxes were in perfect

condition, and they all came toward us—each one the size of a Doberman, made of milky white smoke and hot vapor. So much for the sphinxes being on *our* side.

"Soon!" I warned Sadie.

"Paris!" she called, and raised her staff and wand. "I want to go there *now*. Two tickets. First-class would be nice!"

The sphinxes advanced. The nearest one launched itself toward me, and with sheer luck I managed to slice it in half. The monster evaporated into smoke, but it let out a blast of heat so intense I thought my face was going to melt right off.

Two more sphinx ghosts loped toward me. A dozen more were only a few steps behind. I could feel my pulse pounding in my neck.

Suddenly the ground shook. The sky darkened, and Sadie yelled, "Yes!"

The obelisk glowed with purple light, humming with power. Sadie touched the stone and yelped. She was sucked inside and disappeared.

"Sadie!" I yelled.

In my moment of distraction, two of the sphinxes slammed into me, knocking me to the ground. My sword skittered away. My rib cage went *crack!* and my chest erupted in pain. The heat coming off the creatures was unbearable—it was like being crushed under a hot oven.

I stretched out my fingers toward the obelisk. Just a few inches too far. I could hear the other sphinxes coming, the magician chanting, "Hold him! Hold him!"

With my last bit of strength, I lurched toward the obelisk, every nerve in my body screaming with pain. My fingertips touched the base, and the world went black.

Suddenly I was lying on cold, wet stone. I was in the middle of a huge public plaza. Rain was pouring down, and the chilly air told me I was no longer in Egypt. Sadie was somewhere close by, yelling in alarm.

The bad news: I'd brought the two sphinxes with me. One jumped off me and bounded after Sadie. The other was still on my chest, glaring down at me, its back steaming in the rain, its smoky white eyes inches from my face.

I tried to remember the Egyptian word for *fire*. Maybe if I could set the monster ablaze…but my mind was too full of panic. I heard an explosion off to my right, in the direction Sadie had run. I hoped she'd gotten away, but I couldn't be sure.

The sphinx opened its mouth and formed smoky fangs that had no business on an Ancient Egyptian king. It was about to chomp my face when a dark form loomed up behind it and shouted, *"Mange des muffins!"*

Slice!

The sphinx dissolved into smoke.

I tried to rise but couldn't. Sadie stumbled over. "Carter! Oh god, are you okay?"

I blinked at the other person—the one who had saved me: a tall, thin figure in a black, hooded raincoat. What had she yelled: *Eat muffins?* What kind of battle cry was that?

She threw off her coat, and a woman in a leopard-skin acrobatic suit grinned down at me, showing off her fangs and her lamplike yellow eyes.

"Miss me?" asked Bast.

18. When Fruit Bats Go Bad

WE HUDDLED UNDER THE EAVES of a big white government building and watched the rain pour down on the Place de la Concorde. It was a miserable day to be in Paris. The winter skies were heavy and low, and the cold, wet air soaked right into my bones. There were no tourists, no foot traffic. Everyone with any sense was inside by a fire enjoying a hot drink.

To our right, the River Seine wound sluggishly through the city. Across the enormous plaza, the gardens of the Tuileries were shrouded in a soupy haze.

The Egyptian obelisk rose up lonely and dark in the middle of the square. We waited for more enemies to pop out of it, but none came. I remembered what Zia had said about artifacts needing a twelve-hour cooldown before they could be used again. I hoped she was right.

"Hold still," Bast told me.

I winced as she pressed her hand against my chest. She whispered something in Egyptian, and the pain slowly subsided.

"Broken rib," she announced. "Better now, but you should rest for at least a few minutes."

"What about the magicians?"

"I wouldn't worry about them just yet. The House will assume you teleported somewhere else."

"Why?"

"Paris is the Fourteenth Nome—Desjardins' headquarters. You would be insane trying to hide in his home territory."

"Great." I sighed.

"And your amulets *do* shield you," Bast added. "I could find Sadie anywhere because of my promise to protect her. But the amulets will keep you veiled from the eyes of Set and from other magicians."

I thought about the dark room in the First Nome with all the children looking into bowls of oil. Were they looking for us right now? The thought was creepy.

I tried to sit up and winced again.

"Stay still," Bast ordered. "Really, Carter, you should learn to fall like a cat."

"I'll work on that," I promised. "How are you even alive? Is it that 'nine lives' thing?"

"Oh, that's just a silly legend. I'm *immortal*."

"But the scorpions!" Sadie scrunched in closer, shivering and drawing Bast's raincoat around her shoulders. "We saw them overwhelm you!"

Bast made a purring sound. "Dear Sadie, you do care! I must say I've worked for *many* children

of the pharaohs, but you two—" She looked genuinely touched. "Well, I'm sorry if I worried you. It's true the scorpions reduced my power to almost nothing. I held them off as long as I could. Then I had just enough energy to revert to Muffin's form and slip into the Duat."

"I thought you weren't good at portals," I said.

"Well, first off, Carter, there are many ways in and out of the Duat. It has many different regions and layers—the Abyss, the River of Night, the Land of the Dead, the Land of Demons—"

"Sounds lovely," Sadie muttered.

"Anyway, portals are like doors. They pass through the Duat to connect one part of the mortal world to another. And yes, I'm not good at those. But I *am* a creature of the Duat. If I'm on my own, slipping into the nearest layer for a quick escape is relatively easy."

"And if they'd killed you?" I asked. "I mean, killed Muffin?"

"That would've banished me deep into the Duat. It would've been rather like putting my feet in concrete and dropping me into the middle of the sea. It would've taken years, perhaps centuries, before I would've been strong enough to return to the mortal world. Fortunately, that didn't happen. I came back straightaway, but by the time I got to the museum, the magicians had already captured you."

"We weren't exactly *captured,*" I said.

"Really, Carter? How long were you in the First Nome before they decided to kill you?"

"Um, about twenty-four hours."

Bast whistled. "They've gotten friendlier! They used to blast godlings to dust in the first few minutes."

"We're *not*—wait, what did you call us?"

Sadie answered, sounding as if in a trance: "'Godlings.' That's what we are, aren't we? That's why Zia was so frightened of us, why Desjardins wants to kill us."

Bast patted Sadie's knee. "You always were bright, dear."

"Hold on," I said. "You mean hosts for *gods*? That's not possible. I think I'd know if…"

Then I thought about the voice in my head, warning me to hide when I met Iskandar. I thought about all the things I was suddenly able to do—like fight with a sword and summon a magical shell of armor. Those were not things I'd covered in home school.

"Carter," Sadie said. "When the Rosetta Stone shattered, it let out five gods, right? Dad joined with Osiris. Amos told us that. Set…I don't know. He got away somehow. But you and I—"

"The amulets protected us." I clutched the Eye of Horus around my neck. "Dad said they would."

"*If* we had stayed out of the room, as Dad told us to," Sadie recalled. "But we were there, watching. We wanted to help him. We practically *asked* for power, Carter."

Bast nodded. "That makes all the difference. An invitation."

"And since then…" Sadie looked at me tentatively, almost daring me to make fun of her. "I've had this feeling. Like a voice inside me…."

By now the cold rain had soaked right through my clothes. If Sadie hadn't said something, maybe I could've denied what was happening a little longer. But I thought about what Amos had said about our family having a long history with the gods. I thought about what Zia had told us about our lineage: "The gods choose their hosts carefully. They always prefer the blood of the pharaohs."

"Okay," I admitted. "I've been hearing a voice too. So either we're both going crazy—"

"The amulet." Sadie pulled it from her shirt collar and held it for Bast to see. "It's the symbol of a goddess, isn't it?"

I hadn't seen her amulet in a long time. It was different from mine. It reminded me of an ankh, or maybe some kind of fancy tie.

"That is a *tyet,*" Bast said. "A magic knot. And yes, it is often called—"

"The Knot of Isis," Sadie said. I didn't see how she could know that, but she looked absolutely certain. "In the Hall of Ages, I saw an image of Isis, and then I *was* Isis, trying to get away from Set, and—oh, god. That's it, isn't it? I'm her."

She grabbed her shirt like she physically wanted to pull the goddess away from her. All I could do was stare. My sister, with her ratty red-highlighted hair and her linen pajamas and her combat boots—how could she possibly worry about being possessed by a *goddess*? What goddess would want her, except maybe the goddess of chewing gum?

But then…I'd been hearing a voice inside me too. A voice that was definitely not mine. I looked at my amulet, the Eye of Horus. I thought about the myths I knew—how Horus, the son of Osiris, had to avenge his father by defeating Set. And at Luxor I'd summoned an avatar with the head of a falcon.

I was afraid to try it, but I thought: *Horus?*

Well, it's about time, the other voice said. *Hello, Carter.*

"Oh, no," I said, panic rising in my chest. "No, no, no. Somebody get a can opener. I've got a god stuck in my head."

Bast's eyes lit up. "You communicated with Horus directly? That's excellent progress!"

"Progress?" I banged my palms against my head. "Get him out!"

Calm down, Horus said.

"Don't tell me to calm down!"

Bast frowned. "I didn't."

"Talking to him!" I pointed at my forehead.

"This is awful," Sadie wailed. "How do I get rid of her?"

Bast sniffed. "First off, Sadie, you don't have *all* of her. Gods are very powerful. We can exist in many places at once. But yes, part of Isis's spirit now resides inside you. Just as Carter now carries the spirit of Horus. And frankly, you both should feel honored."

"Right, very honored," I said. "Always wanted to be possessed!"

Bast rolled her eyes. "Please, Carter, it's *not* possession. Besides, you and Horus want the same thing—to defeat Set, just as Horus did millennia ago, when Set first killed Osiris. If you don't, your father is doomed, and Set will become king of the earth."

I glanced at Sadie, but she was no help. She ripped the amulet off her neck and threw it down. "Isis got in through the amulet, didn't she? Well, I'll just—"

"I really wouldn't do that," Bast warned.

But Sadie pulled out her wand and smashed the amulet. Blue sparks shot up from the ivory boomerang. Sadie yelped and dropped her wand, which was now smoking. Her hand was covered in black scorch marks. The amulet was fine. *"Ow!"* she said.

Bast sighed. She put her hand on Sadie's, and the burn marks faded. "I *did* tell you. Isis channeled her power through the amulet, yes, but she's not there now. She's in *you.* And even so, magical amulets are practically indestructible."

"So what are we supposed to do?" Sadie said.

"Well, for starters," Bast said, "Carter must use the power of Horus to defeat Set."

"Oh, is that all?" I said. "All by myself?"

"No, no. Sadie can help."

"Oh, super."

"I'll guide you as much as possible," Bast promised, "but in the end, the two of you must fight. Only Horus and Isis can defeat Set and avenge the death of Osiris. That's the way it was before. That's the way it must be now."

"Then we get our dad back?" I asked.

Bast's smile wavered. "If all goes well."

She wasn't telling us everything. No surprise. But my brain was too fuzzy to figure out what I was missing.

I looked down at my hands. They didn't seem any different—no stronger, no godlier. "If I've got the powers of a god, then why am I so…"

"Lame?" Sadie offered.

"Shut up," I said. "Why can't I use my powers better?"

"Takes practice," Bast said. "Unless you wish to give over control to Horus. Then he would use your form, and you would not have to worry."

I could, a voice said inside me. *Let me fight Set. You can trust me.*

Yeah, right, I told him. *How can I be sure you wouldn't get me killed and just move on to some other host? How can I be sure you're not influencing my thoughts right now?*

I would not do that, the voice said. *I chose you because of your potential, Carter, and because we have the same goal. Upon my honor, if you let me control—*

"No," I said.

I realized I'd spoke aloud; Sadie and Bast were both looking at me.

"I mean I'm not giving up control," I said. "This is *our* fight. Our dad's locked in a coffin. Our uncle's been captured."

"Captured?" Sadie asked. I realized with a shock that I hadn't told her about my last little *ba* trip. There just hadn't been time.

When I gave her the details, she looked stricken. "God, no."

"Yeah," I agreed. "And Set spoke in French—'*Bon soir.*' Sadie, what you said about Set getting away—maybe he didn't. If he was looking for a powerful host—"

"Desjardins," Sadie finished.

Bast growled deep in her throat. "Desjardins was in London the night your father broke the Rosetta Stone, wasn't he? Desjardins has always been full of anger, full of ambition. In many ways, he would be the perfect host for Set. If Set managed to possess Desjardins' body, that would mean the Red Lord now controls the man who is Chief Lector of the House…. By Ra's throne, Carter, I hope you're wrong. The two of you will have to learn to use the power of the gods quickly. Whatever Set is planning, he'll do it on his birthday, when he's strongest. That's the third Demon Day—three days from now."

"But I've already used Isis's powers, haven't I?" Sadie asked. "I've summoned hieroglyphs. I activated the obelisk at Luxor. Was that her or me?"

"Both, dear," Bast said. "You and Carter have great abilities on your own, but the power of the gods has hastened your development, and given you an extra reservoir to draw on. What would've taken you years to learn, you've accomplished in days. The more you channel the power of the gods, the more powerful you will become."

"And the more dangerous it gets," I guessed. "The magicians told us hosting the gods can burn you out, kill you, drive you crazy."

Bast fixed her eyes on me. Just for a second they were the eyes of a predator—ancient, powerful, dangerous. "Not everyone can host a god, Carter. That's true. But *you* two are *both* blood of the pharaohs. You combine *two* ancient bloodlines. That's very rare, very powerful. And besides, if you think you can survive *without* the power of the gods, think again. Don't repeat your mother's —" She stopped herself.

"What?" Sadie demanded. "What about our mother?"

"I shouldn't have said that."

"Tell us, cat!" Sadie said.

I was afraid Bast might unsheathe her knives. Instead she leaned against the wall and stared out at the rain. "When your parents released me from Cleopatra's Needle…there was much more energy than they expected. Your father spoke the actual summoning spell, and the blast would've killed him instantly, but your mother threw up a shield. In that split second, I offered her my help. I offered to merge our spirits and help protect them. But she would not accept my help. She chose to tap her own reservoir…."

"Her own magic," Sadie murmured.

Bast nodded sadly. "When a magician commits herself to a spell, there is no turning back. If she overreaches her power…well, your mother used her last bit of energy protecting your father. To save him, she sacrificed herself. She literally—"

"Burned up," I said. "That's what Zia warned us about."

The rain kept pouring down. I realized I was shivering.

Sadie wiped a tear from her cheek. She picked up her amulet and glared at it resentfully. "We've got to save Dad. If he's really got the spirit of Osiris…"

She didn't finish, but I knew what she was thinking. I thought about Mom when I was little, her arm around my shoulders as we stood on the back deck of our house in L.A. She'd pointed out the stars to me: Polaris, Orion's Belt, Sirius. Then she'd smile at me, and I'd feel like I was more important than any constellation in the sky. My mom had sacrificed herself to save Dad's life. She'd

used so much magic, she literally burned up. How could I ever be that brave? Yet I had to try to save Dad. Otherwise I'd feel like Mom's sacrifice had been for nothing. And maybe if we could rescue Dad, he could set things right, even bring back our mom.

Is that possible? I asked Horus, but his voice was silent.

"All right," I decided. "So how do we stop Set?"

Bast thought for a moment, then smiled. I got the feeling that whatever she was about to suggest, I wasn't going to like it. "There *might* be a way without completely giving yourself over to the gods. There's a book by Thoth—one of the rare spell books written by the god of wisdom himself. The one I'm thinking of details a way to overcome Set. It is the prized possession of a certain magician. All we need to do is sneak into his fortress, steal it, and leave before sunset, while we can still create a portal to the United States."

"Perfect," Sadie said.

"Hold up," I said. "Which magician? And where's the fortress?"

Bast stared at me as if I were a bit slow. "Why, I think we already discussed him. Desjardins. His house is right here in Paris."

Once I saw Desjardins' house, I hated him even more. It was a huge mansion on the other side of the Tuileries, on the rue des Pyramides.

"Pyramids Road?" Sadie said. "Obvious, much?"

"Maybe he couldn't find a place on Stupid Evil Magician Street," I suggested.

The house was spectacular. The spikes atop its wrought iron fence were gilded. Even in the winter rain, the front garden was bursting with flowers. Five stories of white marble walls and black-shuttered windows loomed before us, the whole thing topped off by a roof garden. I'd seen royal palaces smaller than this place.

I pointed to the front door, which was painted bright red. "Isn't red a bad color in Egypt? The color of Set?"

Bast scratched her chin. "Now that you mention it, yes. It's the color of chaos and destruction."

"I thought black was the evil color," Sadie said.

"No, dear. As usual, modern folk have it backward. Black is the color of good soil, like the soil of the Nile. You can grow food in black soil. Food is good. Therefore black is good. Red is the color of desert sand. Nothing grows in the desert. Therefore red is evil." She frowned. "It *is* strange that Desjardins has a red door."

"Well, I'm excited," Sadie grumbled. "Let's go knock."

"There will be guards," Bast said. "And traps. And alarms. You can bet the house is heavily charmed to keep out gods."

"Magicians can do that?" I asked. I imagined a big can of pesticide labeled *God-Away*.

"Alas, yes," Bast said. "I will not be able to cross the threshold uninvited. You, however—"

"I thought we're gods too," Sadie said.

"That's the beauty of it," Bast said. "As hosts, you are still quite human. I have taken full possession of Muffin, so I am pretty much *me*—a goddess. But you are still—well, yourselves. Clear?"

"No," I said.

"I suggest you turn into birds," Bast said. "You can fly to the roof garden and make your way in. Plus, I like birds."

"First problem," I said, "we don't know how to turn into birds."

"Easily fixed! And a good test at channeling godly power. Both Isis and Horus have bird forms. Simply imagine yourselves as birds, and birds you shall become."

"Just like that," Sadie said. "You won't pounce on us?"

Bast looked offended. "Perish the thought!"

I wished she hadn't used the word *perish.*

"Okay," I said. "Here goes."

I thought: *You in there, Horus?*

What? he said testily.

Bird form, please.

Oh, I see. You don't trust me. But now you need my help.

Man, come on. Just do the falcon thing.

Would you settle for an emu?

I decided talking wasn't going to help, so I closed my eyes and imagined I was a falcon. Right away, my skin began to burn. I had trouble breathing. I opened my eyes and gasped.

I was really, really short—eye-level with Bast's shins. I was covered in feathers, and my feet had turned into wicked claws, kind of like my *ba* form, but this was real flesh and blood. My clothes and bag were gone, as if they'd melted into my feathers. My eyesight had completely changed, too. I could see a hundred and eighty degrees around, and the detail was incredible. Every leaf on every tree popped out. I spotted a cockroach a hundred yards away, scurrying into a sewer drain. I could see every pore on Bast's face, now looming above me and grinning.

"Better late than never," she said. "Took you almost ten minutes."

Huh? The change had seemed instantaneous. Then I looked next to me and saw a beautiful gray bird of prey, a little bit smaller than me, with black-tipped wings and golden eyes. I'm not sure how, but I knew it was a kite—like the *bird* kite, not the kind with a string.

The kite let out a chirping sound—*"Ha, ha, ha."* Sadie was laughing at me.

I opened my own beak, but no sound came out.

"Oh, you two look delicious," Bast said, licking her lips. "No, no—*er,* I mean wonderful. Now, off you go!"

I spread my majestic wings. I had really done it! I was a noble falcon, lord of the sky. I launched myself off the sidewalk and flew straight into the fence.

"Ha—ha—ha," Sadie chirped behind me.

Bast crouched down and began making weird chittering noises. *Uh-oh.* She was imitating birds. I'd seen enough cats do this when they were stalking. Suddenly my own obituary flashed in my head: *Carter Kane, 14, died tragically in Paris when he was eaten by his sister's cat, Muffin.*

I spread my wings, kicked off with my feet, and with three strong flaps, I was soaring through the rain. Sadie was right behind me. Together we spiraled up into the air.

I have to admit: it felt amazing. Ever since I was a little kid, I'd had dreams in which I was flying, and I always hated waking up. Now it wasn't a dream or even a *ba* trip. It was one hundred percent real. I sailed on the cold air currents above the rooftops of Paris. I could see the river, the Louvre Museum, the gardens and palaces. And a mouse—yum.

Hang on, Carter, I thought. *Not hunting mice.* I zeroed in on Desjardins' mansion, tucked in my wings, and shot downward.

I saw the rooftop garden, the double glass doors leading inside, and the voice inside me said: *Don't stop. It's an illusion. You've got to punch through their magic barriers.*

It was a crazy thought. I was plummeting so fast I would smack against the glass and become a feathery pancake, but I didn't slow down.

I rammed straight into the doors—and sailed through them as if they didn't exist. I spread my wings and landed on a table. Sadie sailed in right behind me.

We were alone in the middle of a library. So far, so good.

I closed my eyes and thought about returning to my normal form. When I opened my eyes again, I was regular old Carter, sitting on a table in my regular clothes, my workbag back on my shoulder.

Sadie was still a kite.

"You can turn back now," I told her.

She tilted her head and regarded me quizzically. She let out a frustrated croak.

I cracked a smile. "You can't, can you? You're stuck?"

She pecked my hand with her extremely sharp beak.

"Ow!" I complained. "It's not my fault. Keep trying."

She closed her eyes and ruffled her feathers until she looked like she was going to explode, but she stayed a kite.

"Don't worry," I said, trying to keep a straight face. "Bast will help once we get out of here."

"Ha—ha—ha."

"Just keep watch. I'm going to look around."

The room was huge—more like a traditional library than a magician's lair. The furniture was dark mahogany. Every wall was covered with floor-to-ceiling bookcases. Books overflowed onto the floor. Some were stacked on tables or stuffed into smaller shelves. A big easy chair by the window looked like the kind of place Sherlock Holmes would sit smoking a pipe.

Every step I took, the floorboards creaked, which made me wince. I couldn't hear anyone else in the house, but I didn't want to take any chances.

Aside from the glass doors to the rooftop, the only other exit was a solid wooden door that locked from the inside. I turned the deadbolt. Then I wedged a chair up under the handle. I doubted that would keep magicians out for very long, but it might buy me a few seconds if things went bad.

I searched the bookshelves for what seemed like ages. All different types of books were jammed together—nothing alphabetized, nothing numbered. Most of the titles weren't in English. None were in hieroglyphics. I was hoping for something with big gold lettering that said *The Book of Thoth,* but no such luck.

"What would a *Book of Thoth* even look like?" I wondered.

Sadie turned her head and glared at me. I was pretty sure she was telling me to hurry up.

I wished there were *shabti* to fetch things, like the ones in Amos's library, but I didn't see any. Or maybe…

I slung Dad's bag off my shoulder. I set his magic box on the table and slid open the top. The little wax figure was still there, right where I'd left him. I picked him up and said, "Doughboy, help me find *The Book of Thoth* in this library."

His waxy eyes opened immediately. "And why should I help you?"

"Because you have no choice."

"I hate that argument! Fine—hold me up. I can't see the shelves."

I walked him around the room, showing him the books. I felt pretty stupid giving the wax doll a tour, but probably not as stupid as Sadie felt. She was still in bird form, scuttling back and forth on the table and snapping her beak in frustration as she tried to change back.

"Hold it!" Doughboy announced. "This one is ancient—right here."

I pulled down a thin volume bound in linen. It was so tiny, I would've missed it, but sure enough, the front cover was inscribed in hieroglyphics. I brought it over to the table and carefully opened it. It was more like a map than a book, unfolding into four parts until I was looking at a wide, long papyrus scroll with writing so old I could barely make out the characters.

I glanced at Sadie. "I bet you could read this to me if you weren't a bird."

She tried to peck me again, but I moved my hand.

"Doughboy," I said. "What is this scroll?"

"A spell lost in time!" he pronounced. "Ancient words of tremendous power!"

"Well?" I demanded. "Does it tell how to defeat Set?"

"Better! The title reads: *The Book of Summoning Fruit Bats*!"

I stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"Would I joke about such a thing?"

"Who would want to summon fruit bats?"

"Ha—ha—ha," Sadie croaked.

I pushed the scroll away and we went back to searching.

After about ten minutes, Doughboy squealed with delight. "Oh, look! I remember this painting."

It was a small oil portrait in a gilded frame, hanging on the end of a bookshelf. It must've been important, because it was bordered by little silk curtains. A light shone upon the portrait dude's face so he seemed about to tell a ghost story.

"Isn't that the guy who plays Wolverine?" I asked, because he had some serious jowl hair going on.

"You disgust me!" Doughboy said. "That is Jean-François Champollion."

It took me a second, but I remembered the name. "The guy who deciphered hieroglyphics from the Rosetta Stone."

"Of course. Desjardins' great uncle."

I looked at Champollion's picture again, and I could see the resemblance. They had the same

fierce black eyes. "Great uncle? But wouldn't that make Desjardins—"

"About two hundred years old," Doughboy confirmed. "Still a youngster. You know that when Champollion first deciphered hieroglyphics, he fell into a coma for five days? He became the first man outside the House of Life to ever unleash their magic, and it almost killed him. Naturally, that got the attention of the First Nome. Champollion died before he could join the House of Life, but the Chief Lector accepted his descendants for training. Desjardins is very proud of his family…but a little sensitive too, because he's such a newcomer."

"That's why he didn't get along with our family," I guessed. "We're like…ancient."

Doughboy cackled. "And your father breaking the Rosetta Stone? Desjardins would've viewed that as an insult to his family honor! Oh, you should've seen the arguments Master Julius and Desjardins had in this room."

"You've been here before?"

"Many times! I've been everywhere. I'm all-knowing."

I tried to imagine Dad and Desjardins having an argument in here. It wasn't hard. If Desjardins hated our family, and if gods tended to find hosts who shared their goals, then it made total sense that Set would try to merge with him. Both wanted power, both were resentful and angry, both wanted to smash Sadie and me to a pulp. And if Set was now secretly controlling the Chief Lector…A drop of sweat trickled down the side of my face. I wanted to get out of this mansion.

Suddenly there was a banging sound below us, like someone closing a door downstairs.

"Show me where *The Book of Thoth* is," I ordered Doughboy. "Quick!"

As we moved down the shelves, Doughboy grew so warm in my hands, I was afraid he would melt. He kept a running commentary on the books.

"Ah, *Mastery of the Five Elements*!"

"Is that the one we want?" I asked.

"No, but a good one. How to tame the five essential elements of the universe—earth, air, water, fire, and cheese!"

"Cheese?"

He scratched his wax head. "I'm pretty sure that's the fifth, yes. But moving right along!"

We turned to the next shelf. "No," he announced. "No. Boring. Boring. Oh, Clive Cussler! No. No."

I was about to give up hope when he said, "There."

I froze. "Where—here?"

"The blue book with the gold trim," he said. "The one that's—"

I pulled it out, and the entire room began to shake.

"—trapped," Doughboy continued.

Sadie squawked urgently. I turned and saw her take flight. Something small and black swooped down from the ceiling. Sadie clashed with it in midair, and the black thing disappeared down her throat.

Before I could even register how gross that was, alarms blared downstairs. More black forms dropped from the ceiling and seemed to multiply in the air, swirling into a funnel cloud of fur and

wings.

"There's your answer," Doughboy told me. "*Desjardins* would want to summon fruit bats. You mess with the wrong books, you trigger a plague of fruit bats. That's the trap!"

The things were on me like I was a ripe mango—diving at my face, clawing at my arms. I clutched the book and ran to the table, but I could hardly see. "Sadie, get out of here!" I yelled.

"SAW!" she cried, which I hoped meant yes.

I found Dad's workbag and shoved the book and Doughboy inside. The library door rattled. Voices yelled in French.

Horus, bird time! I thought desperately. *And no emu, please!*

I ran for the glass doors. At the last second, I found myself flying—once again a falcon, bursting into the cold rain. I knew with the senses of a predator that I was being followed by approximately four thousand angry fruit bats.

But falcons are wicked fast. Once outside, I raced north, hoping to draw the bats away from Sadie and Bast. I outdistanced the bats easily but let them keep close enough that they wouldn't give up. Then, with a burst of speed, I turned in a tight circle and shot back toward Sadie and Bast in a hundred-mile-an-hour dive.

Bast looked up in surprise as I plummeted to the sidewalk, tumbling over myself as I turned back into a human. Sadie caught my arm, and only then did I realize she was back to normal as well.

"That was awful!" she announced.

"Exit strategy, quick!" I pointed at the sky, where an angry black cloud of fruit bats was getting closer and closer.

"The Louvre." Bast grabbed our hands. "It's got the closest portal."

Three blocks away. We'd never make it.

Then the red door of Desjardins' house blasted open, but we didn't wait to see what came out of it. We ran for our lives down the rue des Pyramides.

SADIE

19. A Picnic in the Sky

[Right, Carter. Give me the mic.]

So I'd been to the Louvre once before on holiday, but I hadn't been chased by vicious fruit bats. I would've been terrified, except I was too busy being angry with Carter. I couldn't believe the way he'd treated my bird problem. Honestly, I thought I would be a kite *forever,* suffocating inside a little feathery prison. And he had the nerve to make fun!

I promised myself I'd get revenge, but for the time being we had enough worries staying alive.

We raced along in the cold rain. It was all I could do to avoid slipping on the slick pavements. I glanced back and saw two figures chasing us—men with shaved heads and goatees and black raincoats. They might've passed for normal mortals except they each carried a glowing staff. Not a good sign.

The bats were literally at our heels. One nipped my leg. Another buzzed my hair. I had to force myself to keep running. My stomach still felt queasy from eating one of the little pests when I was a kite—and no, that had *not* been my idea. Totally a defensive instinct!

"Sadie," Bast called as we ran. "You'll have only seconds to open the portal."

"Where is it?" I yelled.

We dashed across the rue de Rivoli into a wide plaza surrounded by the wings of the Louvre. Bast made straight for the glass pyramid at the entrance, glowing in the dusk.

"You can't be serious," I said. "That isn't a *real* pyramid."

"Of course it's real," Bast said. "The *shape* gives a pyramid its power. It is a ramp to the heavens."

The bats were all around us now—biting our arms, flying around our feet. As their numbers increased, it got harder to see or move.

Carter reached for his sword, then apparently remembered it wasn't there anymore. He'd lost it at Luxor. He swore and rummaged around in his workbag.

"Don't slow down!" Bast warned.

Carter pulled out his wand. In total frustration, he threw it at a bat. I thought this a pointless gesture, but the wand glowed white-hot and thumped the bat solidly on the head, knocking it out of the air. The wand ricocheted through the swarm, thumping six, seven, eight of the little monsters before returning to Carter's hand.

"Not bad," I said. "Keep it up!"

We arrived at the base of the pyramid. The plaza was thankfully empty. The last thing I wanted

was my embarrassing death by fruit bats posted on YouTube.

"One minute until sundown," Bast warned. "Our last chance for summoning is *now*."

She unsheathed her knives and started slicing bats out of the air, trying to keep them away from me. Carter's wand flew wildly, knocking fruit bats every which way. I faced the pyramid and tried to think of a portal, the way I'd done at Luxor, but it was almost impossible to concentrate.

Where do you wish to go? Isis said in my mind.

God, I don't care! America!

I realized I was crying. I hated to, but shock and fear were starting to overwhelm me. Where did I want to go? Home, of course! Back to my flat in London—back to my own room, my grandparents, my mates at school and my *old life*. But I couldn't. I had to think about my father and our mission. We had to get to Set.

America, I thought. *Now!*

My burst of emotion must've had some effect. The pyramid trembled. Its glass walls shimmered and the top of the structure began to glow.

A swirling sand vortex appeared, all right. Only one problem: it was hovering above the very top of the pyramid.

"Climb!" Bast said. Easy for her—she was a cat.

"The side is too steep!" Carter objected.

He'd done a good job with the bats. Dazed heaps littered the pavement, but more still flew round us, biting every bit of exposed skin, and the magicians were closing in.

"I'll toss you," Bast said.

"Excuse me?" Carter protested, but she picked him up by his collar and pants and tossed him up the side of the pyramid. He skittered to the top in a very undignified manner and slipped straight through the portal.

"Now you, Sadie," Bast said. "Come on!"

Before I could move, a man's voice yelled, "Stop!"

Stupidly, I froze. The voice was so powerful, it was hard not to.

The two magicians were approaching. The taller one spoke in perfect English: "Surrender, Miss Kane, and return our master's property."

"Sadie, don't listen," Bast warned. "Come here."

"The cat goddess deceives you," the magician said. "She abandoned her post. She endangered us all. She will lead you to ruin."

I could tell he meant it. He was absolutely convinced of what he said.

I turned to Bast. Her expression had changed. She looked wounded, even grief-stricken.

"What does he mean?" I said. "What did you do wrong?"

"We have to leave," she warned. "Or they will kill us."

I looked at the portal. Carter was already through. That decided it. I wasn't going to be separated from him. As annoying as he was, Carter was the only person I had left. (How is that for depressing?)

"Toss me," I said.

Bast grabbed me. "See you in America." Then she chucked me up the side of the pyramid.

I heard the magician roar, "Surrender!" And an explosion rattled the glass next to my head. Then I plunged into the hot vortex of sand.

I woke in a small room with industrial carpeting, gray walls, and metal-framed windows. I felt as if I were inside a high-tech refrigerator. I sat up groggily and discovered I was coated in cold, wet sand.

"Ugh," I said. "Where are we?"

Carter and Bast stood by the window. Apparently they'd been conscious for a while, because they'd both brushed themselves off.

"You've got to see this view," Carter said.

I got shakily to my feet and nearly fell down again when I saw how high we were.

An entire city spread out below us—I mean *far* below, well over a hundred meters. I could almost believe we were still in Paris, because a river curved off to our left, and the land was mostly flat. There were white government buildings clustered around networks of parks and circular roads, all spread out under a winter sky. But the light was wrong. It was still afternoon here, so we must've traveled west. And as my eyes made their way to the other end of a long rectangular green space, I found myself staring at a mansion that looked oddly familiar.

"Is that…the White House?"

Carter nodded. "You got us to America, all right. Washington, D.C."

"But we're sky high!"

Bast chuckled. "You didn't specify any particular American city, did you?"

"Well…no."

"So you got the default portal for the U.S.—the largest single source of Egyptian power in North America."

I stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"The biggest obelisk ever constructed," she said. "The Washington Monument."

I had another moment of vertigo and moved away from the window. Carter grabbed my shoulder and helped me sit down.

"You should rest," he said. "You passed out for…how long, Bast?"

"Two hours and thirty-two minutes," she said. "I'm sorry, Sadie. Opening more than one portal a day *is* extremely taxing, even with Isis helping."

Carter frowned. "But we need her to do it again, right? It's not sunset here yet. We can still use portals. Let's open one and get to Arizona. That's where Set is."

Bast pursed her lips. "Sadie can't summon another portal. It would overextend her powers. I don't have the talent. And you, Carter…well, your abilities lie elsewhere. No offense."

"Oh, no," he grumbled. "I'm sure you'll call me next time you need to boomerang some fruit bats."

"Besides," Bast said, "when a portal is used, it needs time to cool down. No one will be able to use the Washington Monument—"

"For another twelve hours." Carter cursed. "I forgot about that."

Bast nodded. "And by then, the Demon Days will have begun."

"So we need another way to Arizona," Carter said.

I suppose he didn't mean to make me feel guilty, but I did. I hadn't thought things through, and now we were stuck in Washington.

I glanced at Bast out the corner of my eye. I wanted to ask her what the men at the Louvre had meant about her leading us to ruin, but I was afraid to. I wanted to believe she was on our side. Perhaps if I gave her a chance, she'd volunteer the information.

"At least those magicians can't follow us," I prompted.

Bast hesitated. "Not through the portal, no. But there are other magicians in America. And worse… Set's minions."

My heart climbed into my throat. The House of Life was scary enough, but when I remembered Set, and what his minions had done to Amos's house…

"What about Thoth's spellbook?" I said. "Did we at least find a way to fight Set?"

Carter pointed to the corner of the room. Spread out on Bast's raincoat was Dad's magic toolbox and the blue book we'd stolen from Desjardins.

"Maybe you can make sense of it," Carter said. "Bast and I couldn't read it. Even Doughboy was stumped."

I picked up the book, which was actually a scroll folded into sections. The papyrus was so brittle, I was afraid to touch it. Hieroglyphs and illustrations crowded the page, but I couldn't make sense of them. My ability to read the language seemed to be switched off.

Isis? I asked. *A little help?*

Her voice was silent. Maybe I'd worn her out. Or maybe she was cross with me for not letting her take over my body, the way Horus had asked Carter to do. Selfish of me, I know.

I closed the book in frustration. "All that work for nothing."

"Now, now," Bast said. "It's not so bad."

"Right," I said. "We're stuck in Washington, D.C. We have two days to make it to Arizona and stop a god we don't know how to stop. And if we can't, we'll never see our dad or Amos again, and the world might end."

"That's the spirit!" Bast said brightly. "Now, let's have a picnic."

She snapped her fingers. The air shimmered, and a pile of Friskies cans and two jugs of milk appeared on the carpet.

"Um," Carter said, "can you conjure any people food?"

Bast blinked. "Well, no accounting for taste."

The air shimmered again. A plate of grilled cheese sandwiches and crisps appeared, along with a six-pack of Coke.

"Yum," I said.

Carter muttered something under his breath. I suppose grilled cheese wasn't his favorite, but he picked up a sandwich.

"We should leave soon," he said between bites. "I mean…tourists and all."

Bast shook her head. “The Washington Monument closes at six o’clock. The tourists are gone now. We might as well stay the night. If we must travel during the Demon Days, best to do it in daylight hours.”

We all must’ve been exhausted, because we didn’t talk again until we’d finished our food. I ate three sandwiches and drank two Cokes. Bast made the whole place smell like fish Friskies, then started licking her hand as if preparing for a cat bath.

“Could you not do that?” I asked. “It’s disturbing.”

“Oh.” She smiled. “Sorry.”

I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall. It felt good to rest, but I realized the room wasn’t actually quiet. The entire building seemed to be humming ever so slightly, sending a tremble through my skull that made my teeth buzz. I opened my eyes and sat up. I could still feel it.

“What is that?” I asked. “The wind?”

“Magic energy,” Bast said. “I told you, this is a powerful monument.”

“But it’s modern. Like the Louvre pyramid. Why is it magic?”

“The Ancient Egyptians were excellent builders, Sadie. They picked shapes—obelisks, pyramids—that were charged with symbolic magic. An obelisk represents a sunbeam frozen in stone—a life-giving ray from the original king of the gods, Ra. It doesn’t matter *when* the structure was built: it is still Egyptian. That’s why any obelisk can be used for opening gates to the Duat, or releasing great beings of power—”

“Or trapping them,” I said. “The way you were trapped *in* Cleopatra’s Needle.”

Her expression darkened. “I wasn’t actually trapped in the obelisk. My prison was a magically created abyss deep in the Duat, and the obelisk was the door your parents used to release me. But, yes. All symbols of Egypt are concentrated nodes of magic power. So an obelisk can definitely be used to imprison gods.”

An idea was nagging at the back of my mind, but I couldn’t quite pin it down. Something about my mother, and Cleopatra’s Needle, and my father’s last promise in the British Museum: *I’ll put things right*.

Then I thought back to the Louvre, and the comment the magician had made. Bast looked so cross at the moment I was almost afraid to ask, but it was the only way I’d get an answer. “The magician said you abandoned your post. What did he mean?”

Carter frowned. “When was this?”

I told him what had happened after Bast chucked him through the portal.

Bast stacked her empty Friskies cans. She didn’t look eager to reply.

“When I was imprisoned,” she said at last, “I—I wasn’t alone. I was locked inside with a… creature of chaos.”

“Is that bad?” I asked.

Judging from Bast’s expression, the answer was yes. “Magicians often do this—lock a god up together with a monster so we have no time to try escaping our prison. For eons, I fought this monster. When your parents released me—”

“The monster got out?”

Bast hesitated a little too long for my taste.

"No. My enemy couldn't have escaped." She took a deep breath. "Your mother's final act of magic sealed that gate. The enemy was still inside. But that's what the magician meant. As far as he was concerned, my 'post' was battling that monster forever."

It had the ring of truth, as if she were sharing a painful memory, but it didn't explain the other bit the magician had said: *She endangered us all.* I was getting up the nerve to ask exactly what the monster had been, when Bast stood up.

"I should go scout," she said abruptly. "I'll be back."

We listened to her footsteps echo down the stairwell.

"She's hiding something," Carter said.

"Work that out yourself, did you?" I asked.

He looked away, and immediately I felt bad.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's just…what are we going to do?"

"Rescue Dad. What else can we do?" He picked up his wand and turned it in his fingers. "Do you think he really meant to…you know, bring Mom back?"

I wanted to say yes. More than anything, I wanted to believe that was possible. But I found myself shaking my head. Something about it didn't seem right. "Iskandar told me something about Mum," I said. "She was a diviner. She could see the future. He said she made him rethink some old ideas."

It was my first chance to tell Carter about my conversation with the old magician, so I gave him the details.

Carter knit his eyebrows. "You think that has something to do with why Mom died—she saw something in the future?"

"I don't know." I tried to think back to when I was six, but my memory was frustratingly fuzzy. "When they took us to England the last time, did she and Dad seemed like they were in a hurry—like they were doing something really important?"

"Definitely."

"Would you say freeing Bast was really important? I mean—I love her, of course—but *worth dying for* important?"

Carter hesitated. "Probably not."

"Well, there you are. I think Dad and Mum were up to something bigger, something they didn't complete. Possibly that's what Dad was after at the British Museum—completing the task, whatever it was. *Making things right.* And this whole business about our family going back a billion years to some god-hosting pharaohs—why didn't anyone *tell* us? Why didn't Dad?"

Carter didn't answer for a long time.

"Maybe Dad was protecting us," he said. "The House of Life doesn't trust our family, especially after what Dad and Mom did. Amos said we were raised apart for a reason, so we wouldn't, like, trigger each other's magic."

"Bloody awful reason to keep us apart," I muttered.

Carter looked at me strangely, and I realized what I'd said might have been construed as a compliment.

"I just mean they should've been honest," I rushed on. "Not that I *wanted* more time with my annoying brother, of course."

He nodded seriously. "Of course."

We sat listening to the magic hum of the obelisk. I tried to remember the last time Carter and I had simply spent time like this together, talking.

"Is your, *um*…" I tapped the side of my head. "Your *friend* being any help?"

"Not much," he admitted. "Yours?"

I shook my head. "Carter, are you scared?"

"A little." He dug his wand into the carpet. "No, a lot."

I looked at the blue book we'd stolen—pages full of wonderful secrets I couldn't read. "What if we can't do it?"

"I don't know," he said. "That book about mastering the element of cheese would've been more helpful."

"Or summoning fruit bats."

"Please, not the fruit bats."

We shared a weary smile, and it felt rather good. But it changed nothing. We were still in serious trouble with no clear plan.

"Why don't you sleep on it?" he suggested. "You used a lot of energy today. I'll keep watch until Bast gets back."

He actually sounded concerned for me. How cute.

I didn't want to sleep. I didn't want to miss anything. But I realized my eyelids *were* incredibly heavy.

"All right, then," I said. "Don't let the bedbugs bite."

I lay down to sleep, but my soul—my *ba*—had other ideas.

SADIE

20. I Visit the Star-Spangled Goddess

I HADN'T REALIZED HOW UNSETTLING it would be. Carter had explained how his *ba* left his body while he slept, but having it happen to me was another thing altogether. It was much worse than my vision in the Hall of Ages.

There I was, floating in the air as a glowing birdlike spirit. And there was my body below me, fast asleep. Just trying to describe it gives me a headache.

My first thought as I gazed down on my sleeping form: *God, I look awful*. Bad enough looking in a mirror or seeing pictures of myself on my friends' Web pages. Seeing myself in person was simply *wrong*. My hair was a rat's nest, the linen pajamas were not in the least flattering, and the spot on my chin was *enormous*.

My second thought as I examined the strange shimmering form of my *ba*: *This won't do at all*. I didn't care if I was invisible to the mortal eye or not. After my bad experience as a kite, I simply refused to go about as a glowing Sadie-headed chicken. That's fine for Carter, but I have standards.

I could feel the currents of the Duat tugging at me, trying to pull my *ba* to wherever souls go when they have visions, but I wasn't ready. I concentrated hard, and imagined my normal appearance (well, all right, perhaps my appearance as I'd *like* it to be, a bit better than normal). And *voilà,* my *ba* morphed into a human form, still see-through and glowing, mind you, but more like a proper ghost.

Well, at least that's sorted, I thought. And I allowed the currents to sweep me away. The world melted to black.

At first, I was nowhere—just a dark void. Then a young man stepped out of the shadows.

"You again," he said.

I stammered. "*Uh*..."

Honestly, you know me well enough by now. That's *not* like me. But this was the boy I'd seen in my Hall of Ages vision—the very handsome boy with the black robes and tousled hair. His dark brown eyes had the most unnerving effect on me, and I was *very* glad I'd changed out of my glowing chicken outfit.

I tried again, and managed three entire words. "What are you…"

"Doing here?" he said, gallantly finishing my sentence. "Spirit travel and death are very similar."

"Not sure what that means," I said. "Should I be worried?"

He tilted his head as if considering the question. "Not this trip. She only wants to talk to you. Go ahead."

He waved his hand and a doorway opened in the darkness. I was pulled towards it.

"See you again?" I asked.

But the boy was gone.

I found myself standing in a luxury flat in the middle of the sky. It had no walls, no ceiling, and a see-through floor looking straight down at city lights from the height of an airplane. Clouds drifted below my feet. The air should've been freezing cold and too thin to breathe, but I felt warm and comfortable.

Black leather sofas made a U round a glass coffee table on a blood-red rug. A fire burned in a slate fireplace. Bookshelves and paintings hovered in the air where the walls should've been. A black granite bar stood in the corner, and in the shadows behind it, a woman was making tea.

"Hello, my child," she said.

She stepped into the light, and I gasped. She wore an Egyptian kilt from the waist down. From the waist up, she wore only a bikini top, and her skin…her skin was dark blue, covered with stars. I don't mean *painted* stars. She had the entire cosmos living on her skin: gleaming constellations, galaxies too bright to look at, glowing nebulae of pink and blue dust. Her features seemed to disappear into the stars that shifted across her face. Her hair was long and as black as midnight.

"You're the Nut," I said. Then I realized maybe that had come out wrong. "I mean…the sky goddess."

The goddess smiled. Her bright white teeth were like a new galaxy bursting into existence. "Nut is fine. And believe me, I've heard all the jokes about my name."

She poured a second cup from her teapot. "Let's sit and talk. Care for some *sahlab*?"

"Uh, it's not tea?"

"No, an Egyptian drink. You've heard of hot chocolate? This is rather like hot vanilla."

I would've preferred tea, as I hadn't had a proper cup in ages. But I supposed one didn't turn down a goddess. "*Um*…yeah. Thanks."

We sat together on the sofa. To my surprise, my glowing spirity hands had no trouble holding a teacup, and I could drink quite easily. The *sahlab* was sweet and tasty, with just a hint of cinnamon and coconut. It warmed me up nicely and filled the air with the smell of vanilla. For the first time in days I felt safe. Then I remembered I was only here in spirit.

Nut set down her cup. "I suppose you're wondering why I've brought you here."

"Where exactly is 'here'? And, ah, who's your doorman?"

I hoped she'd drop some information about the boy in black, but she only smiled. "I must keep my secrets, dear. I can't have the House of Life trying to find me. Let's just say I've built this home with a nice city view."

"Is that…" I gestured to her starry blue skin. "*Um*…are you inside a human host?"

"No, dear. The sky itself is my body. This is merely a manifestation."

"But I thought—"

"Gods need a physical host outside the Duat? It's somewhat easier for me, being a spirit of the air. I was one of the few gods who was never imprisoned, because the House of Life could never catch me. I'm used to being…*free-form*." Suddenly Nut and the entire apartment flickered. I felt like I would drop through the floor. Then the sofa became stable again.

"Please don't do that again," I begged.

"My apologies," Nut said. "The point is, each god is different. But all my brethren are free now, all finding places in this modern world of yours. They won't be imprisoned again."

"The magicians won't like that."

"No," Nut agreed. "That's the first reason you are here. A battle between the gods and the House of Life would serve only chaos. You must make the magicians understand this."

"They won't listen to me. They think I'm a godling."

"You *are* a godling, dear." She touched my hair gently, and I felt Isis stirring within me, struggling to speak using my voice.

"I'm Sadie Kane," I said. "I didn't ask for Isis to hitch a ride."

"The gods have known your family for generations, Sadie. In the olden days, we worked together for the benefit of Egypt."

"The magicians said that gods caused the fall of the empire."

"That is a long and pointless debate," Nut said, and I could hear an edge of anger in her voice. "All empires fall. But *the idea* of Egypt is eternal—the triumph of civilization, the forces of Ma'at overcoming the forces of chaos. That battle is fought generation after generation. Now it's your turn."

"I know, I know," I said. "We have to defeat Set."

"But is it that simple, Sadie? Set is my son, too. In the old days, he was Ra's strongest lieutenant. He protected the sun god's boat from the serpent Apophis. Now *there* was evil. Apophis was the embodiment of chaos. He hated Creation from the moment the first mountain appeared out of the sea. He hated the gods, mortals, and everything they built. And yet Set fought against him. Set was one of us."

"Then he turned evil?"

Nut shrugged. "Set has always been Set, for better or worse. But he is still part of our family. It is difficult to lose any member of your family…is it not?"

My throat tightened. "That's hardly fair."

"Don't speak to me of fairness," Nut said. "For five thousand years, I have been kept apart from my husband, Geb."

I vaguely remembered Carter saying something about this, but it seemed different listening to her now, hearing the pain in her voice.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Punishment for bearing my children," she said bitterly. "I disobeyed Ra's wishes, and so he ordered my own father, Shu—"

"Hang on," I said. "Shoe?"

"S-h-u," she said. "The god of the wind."

"Oh." I wished these gods had names that weren't common household objects. "Go on, please."

"Ra ordered my father, Shu, to keep us apart, forever. I am exiled to the sky, while my beloved Geb cannot leave the ground."

"What happens if you try?"

Nut closed her eyes and spread her hands. A hole opened where she was sitting, and she fell

through the air. Instantly, the clouds below us flickered with lightning. Winds raged across the flat, throwing books off the shelves, ripping away paintings and flinging them into the void. My teacup leaped out of my hand. I grabbed the sofa to avoid getting blown away myself.

Below me, lightning struck Nut's form. The wind pushed her violently upward, shooting past me. Then the winds died. Nut settled back onto the couch. She waved her hand and the flat repaired itself. Everything returned to normal.

"*That* happens," she said sadly.

"Oh."

She gazed at the city lights far below. "It has given me appreciation for my children, even Set. He has done horrible things, yes. It is his nature. But he is still my son, and still one of the gods. He acts his part. Perhaps the way to defeat him is not the way you would imagine."

"Hints, please?"

"Seek out Thoth. He has found a new home in Memphis."

"Memphis…Egypt?"

Nut smiled. "Memphis, Tennessee. Although the old bird probably *thinks* it is Egypt. He so rarely takes his beak out of his books, I doubt he would know the difference. You will find him there. He can advise you. Be wary, though: Thoth often asks for favors. He is sometimes hard to predict."

"Getting used to that," I said. "How are we supposed to get there?"

"I am goddess of the sky. I can guarantee you safe travel as far as Memphis." She waved her hand, and a folder appeared in my lap. Inside were three plane tickets—Washington to Memphis, first-class.

I raised my eyebrow. "I suppose you get a lot of frequent flyer miles?"

"Something like that," Nut agreed. "But as you get closer to Set, you will be beyond my help. And I cannot protect you on the ground. Which reminds me: You need to wake up soon. Set's minion is closing in on your hideout."

I sat up straight. "How soon?"

"Minutes."

"Send my spirit back, then!" I pinched my ghostly arm, which hurt just like it would on my normal arm, but nothing happened.

"Soon, Sadie," Nut promised. "But two more things you must know. I had five children during the Demon Days. If your father released all of them, you should consider: Where is the fifth?"

I racked my brain trying to remember the names of all of Nut's five children. Bit difficult without my brother, the Human Wikipedia, around to keep track of such trivia for me. There was Osiris, the king, and Isis, his queen; Set, the evil god, and Horus, the avenger. But the fifth child of Nut, the one Carter said he could never remember… Then I recalled my vision in the Hall of Ages—Osiris's birthday and the woman in blue who'd helped Isis escape Set. "You mean Nephthys, Set's wife?"

"Consider it," Nut said again. "And lastly…a favor."

She opened her hand and produced an envelope sealed with red wax. "If you see Geb…will you give him this?"

I'd been asked to pass notes before, but never between gods. Honestly, Nut's anguished expression was no different than those of my love-struck friends back at school. I wondered if she'd

ever written on her notebook: GEB + NUT = TRUE LOVE or MRS. GEB.

"Least I can do," I promised. "Now, about sending me back…"

"Safe travels, Sadie," the goddess said. "And Isis, restrain yourself."

The spirit of Isis rumbled inside me, as if I'd eaten a bad curry.

"Wait," I said, "what do you mean restrain—"

Before I could finish, my vision went black.

I snapped awake, back in my own body at the Washington Monument. "Leave now!"

Carter and Bast jumped in surprise. They were already awake, packing their things.

"What's wrong?" Carter asked.

I told them about my vision while I frantically searched my pockets. Nothing. I checked my magician's bag. Tucked inside with my wand and rod were three plane tickets and a sealed envelope.

Bast examined the tickets. "Excellent! First class serves salmon."

"But what about Set's minion?" I asked.

Carter glanced out the window. His eyes widened. "Yeah, *um*…it's here."

21. Aunt Kitty to the Rescue

I'D SEEN PICTURES OF THE CREATURE BEFORE, but pictures didn't come close to capturing how horrible it was in real life.

"The Set animal," Bast said, confirming my fear.

Far below, the creature prowled the base of the monument, leaving tracks in the new-fallen snow. I had trouble judging its size, but it must've been at least as big as a horse, with legs just as long. It had an unnaturally lean, muscled body with shiny reddish gray fur. You could almost mistake it for a huge greyhound—except for the tail and the head. The tail was reptilian, forked at the end with triangular points, like squid tentacles. It lashed around as if it had a mind of its own.

The creature's head was the strangest part. Its oversize ears stuck straight up like rabbit ears, but they were shaped more like ice cream cones, curled inward and wider on the top than the bottom. They could rotate almost three hundred and sixty degrees, so they could hear anything. The creature's snout was long and curved like an anteater's—only anteaters don't have razor-sharp teeth.

"Its eyes are glowing," I said. "That can't be good."

"How can you see that far?" Sadie demanded.

She stood next to me, squinting at the tiny figure in the snow, and I realized she had a point. The animal was at least five hundred feet below us. How was I able to see its eyes?

"You still have the sight of the falcon," Bast guessed. "And you're right, Carter. The glowing eyes mean the creature has caught our scent."

I looked at her and almost jumped out of my skin. Her hair was sticking straight up all over her head, like she'd stuck her finger in a light socket.

"*Um,* Bast?" I asked.

"What?"

Sadie and I exchanged looks. She mouthed the word *scared.* Then I remembered how Muffin's tail would always poof up when something startled her.

"Nothing," I said, though if the Set animal was so dangerous that it gave our goddess light-socket hair, that had to be a very bad sign. "How do we get out of here?"

"You don't understand," Bast said. "The Set animal is the perfect hunter. If it has our scent, there is no stopping it."

"Why is it called the 'Set animal'?" Sadie asked nervously. "Doesn't it have a name?"

"If it did," Bast said, "you would not want to speak it. It is merely known as the Set animal—the Red Lord's symbolic creature. It shares his strength, cunning…and his evil nature."

"Lovely," Sadie said.

The animal sniffed at the monument and recoiled, snarling.

"It doesn't seem to like the obelisk," I noticed.

"No," Bast said. "Too much Ma'at energy. But that won't hold it back for long."

As if on cue, the Set animal leaped onto the side of the monument. It began climbing like a lion scaling a tree, digging its claws into the stone.

"That's messed up," I said. "Elevator or stairs?"

"Both are too slow," Bast said. "Back away from the window."

She unsheathed her knives and sliced through the glass. She punched out the window, setting off alarm bells. Freezing air blasted into the observation room.

"You'll need to fly," Bast yelled over the wind. "It's the only way."

"No!" Sadie's face went pale. "Not the kite again."

"Sadie, it's okay," I said.

She shook her head, terrified.

I grabbed her hand. "I'll stay with you. I'll make sure you turn back."

"The Set animal is halfway up," Bast warned. "We're running out of time."

Sadie glanced at Bast. "What about you? You can't fly."

"I'll jump," she said. "Cats always land on their feet."

"It's over a hundred meters!" Sadie cried.

"A hundred and seventy," Bast said. "I'll distract the Set animal, buy you some time."

"You'll be killed." Sadie's voice sounded close to breaking. "Please, I can't lose you too."

Bast looked a little surprised. Then she smiled and put her hand on Sadie's shoulder. "I'll be fine, dear. Meet me at Reagan National, terminal A. Be ready to run."

Before I could argue, Bast jumped out the window. My heart just about stopped. She plummeted straight toward the pavement. I was sure she'd die, but as she fell she spread her arms and legs and seemed to relax.

She hurtled straight past the Set animal, which let out a horrible scream like a wounded man on a battlefield, then turned and leaped after her.

Bast hit the ground with both feet and took off running. She must've been doing sixty miles an hour, easy. The Set animal wasn't as agile. It crashed so hard, the pavement cracked. It stumbled for a few steps but didn't appear hurt. Then it loped after Bast and was soon gaining on her.

"She won't make it," Sadie fretted.

"Never bet against a cat," I said. "We've got to do our part. Ready?"

She took a deep breath. "All right. Before I change my mind."

Instantly, a black-winged kite appeared in front of me, flapping its wings to keep its balance in the intense wind. I willed myself to become a falcon. It was even easier than before.

A moment later, we soared into the cold morning air over Washington, D.C.

Finding the airport was easy. Reagan National was so close, I could see the planes landing across the Potomac.

The hard part was remembering what I was doing. Every time I saw a mouse or a squirrel, I instinctively veered toward it. A couple of times I caught myself about to dive, and I had to fight the urge. Once I looked over and realized I was a mile away from Sadie, who was off doing her own hunting. I had to force myself to fly next to her and get her attention.

It takes willpower to stay human, the voice of Horus warned. *The more time you spend as a bird of prey, the more you think like one.*

Now you tell me, I thought.

I could help, he urged. *Give me control.*

Not today, bird-head.

Finally, I steered Sadie toward the airport, and we started hunting for a place to change back to human form. We landed at the top of a parking garage.

I willed myself to turn human. Nothing happened.

Panic started building in my throat. I closed my eyes and pictured my dad's face. I thought about how much I missed him, how much I needed to find him.

When I opened my eyes, I was back to normal. Unfortunately, Sadie was still a kite. She flapped around me and cawed frantically. *"Ha—ha—ha!"* There was a wild look in her eyes, and this time I understood how scared she was. Bird form had been hard enough for her to break out of the first time. If the second time took even more energy, she could be in serious trouble.

"It's all right." I crouched down, careful to move slowly. "Sadie, don't force it. You have to relax."

"Ha!" She tucked in her wings. Her chest was heaving.

"Listen, it helped me to focus on Dad. Remember what's important to you. Close your eyes and think about your human life."

She closed her eyes, but almost instantly cried out in frustration and flapped her wings.

"Stop," I said. "Don't fly away!"

She tilted her head and gurgled in a pleading way. I started talking to her the way I would to a scared animal. I wasn't really paying attention to the words. I was just trying to keep my tone calm. But after a minute I realized I was telling her about my travels with Dad, and the memories that had helped me get out of bird form. I told her about the time Dad and I got stuck in the Venice airport and I ate so many cannoli, I got sick. I told her about the time in Egypt when I found the scorpion in my sock, and Dad managed to kill it with a TV remote control. I told her how we'd gotten separated once in the London Underground and how scared I was until Dad finally found me. I told her some pretty embarrassing stories that I'd never shared with anyone, because who could I share them with? And it seemed to me that Sadie listened. At least she stopped flapping her wings. Her breathing slowed. She became very still, and her eyes didn't look so panicked.

"Okay, Sadie," I said at last. "I've got an idea. Here's what we're going to do."

I took Dad's magic box out of its leather bag. I wrapped the bag around my forearm and tied it with the straps as best I could. "Hop on."

Sadie flew up and perched at my wrist. Even with my makeshift armguard, her sharp talons dug into my skin.

"We'll get you out of this," I said. "Keep trying. Relax, and focus on your human life. You'll

figure it out, Sadie. I know you will. I'll carry you until then."

"Ha."

"Come on," I said. "Let's find Bast."

With my sister perched on my arm, I walked to the elevator. A businessman with a rolling suitcase was waiting by the doors. His eyes widened when he saw me. I must've looked pretty strange—a tall black kid in dirty, ragged Egyptian clothes, with a weird box tucked under one arm and a bird of prey perched on the other.

"How's it going?" I said.

"I'll take the stairs." He hurried off.

The elevator took me to the ground level. Sadie and I crossed to the departures curb. I looked around desperately, hoping to see Bast, but instead I caught the attention of a curbside policeman. The guy frowned and started lumbering in my direction.

"Stay calm," I told Sadie. Resisting the urge to run, I turned and walked through the revolving doors.

Here's the thing—I always get a little edgy around police. I remember when I was like seven or eight and still a cute little kid, it wasn't a problem; but as soon as I hit eleven, I started to get the Look, like *What's that kid doing here? Is he going to steal something?* I mean it's ridiculous, but it's a fact. I'm not saying it happens with *every* police officer, but when it doesn't happen—let's just say it's a pleasant surprise.

This was not one of the pleasant times. I knew the cop was going to follow me, and I knew I had to act calm and walk like I had a purpose…which is not easy with a kite on your arm.

Christmas vacation, so the airport was pretty full—mostly families standing in line at the ticket counters, kids arguing and parents labeling luggage. I wondered what that would be like: a normal family trip, no magic problems or monsters chasing you.

Stop it, I told myself. *You've got work to do.*

But I didn't know where to go. Would Bast be inside security? Outside? The crowds parted as I walked through the terminal. People stared at Sadie. I knew I couldn't wander around looking lost. It was only a matter of time before the cops—

"Young man."

I turned. It was the police officer from outside. Sadie squawked, and the cop backed up, resting his hand on his nightstick.

"You can't have pets in here," he told me.

"I have tickets…." I tried to reach my pockets. Then I remembered that Bast had our tickets.

The cop scowled. "You'd better come with me."

Suddenly a woman's voice called: "There you are, Carter!"

Bast was hurrying over, pushing her way through the crowd. I'd never been happier to see an Egyptian god in my life.

Somehow she'd managed to change clothes. She wore a rose-colored pantsuit, lots of gold jewelry, and a cashmere coat, so she looked like a wealthy businesswoman. Ignoring the cop, she sized up my appearance and wrinkled her nose. "Carter, I *told* you not to wear those horrible falconry clothes. Honestly, you look like you've been sleeping in the wild!"

She took out a handkerchief and made a big production of wiping my face, while the policeman stared.

"*Uh,* ma'am," he finally managed. "Is this your—"

"Nephew," Bast lied. "I'm so sorry, officer. We're heading to Memphis for a falconry competition. I hope he hasn't caused any problems. We're going to miss our flight!"

"*Um,* the falcon can't fly…"

Bast giggled. "Well, of course it can fly, officer. It's a bird!"

His face reddened. "I mean on a plane."

"Oh! We have the paperwork." To my amazement, she pulled out an envelope and handed it to the cop, along with our tickets.

"I see," the cop said. He looked our tickets over. "You bought…a first class ticket for your falcon."

"It's a black kite, actually," Bast said. "But yes, it's a very temperamental bird. A prizewinner, you know. Give it a coach seat and try to offer it pretzels, and I won't be held responsible for the consequences. No, we *always* fly first class, don't we, Carter?"

"*Um*, yeah…Aunt Kitty."

She flashed me a look that said: *I'll get you for that.* Then she went back to smiling at the cop, who handed back our tickets and Sadie's "paperwork."

"Well, if you'll excuse us, officer. That's a very handsome uniform, by the way. Do you work out?" Before he could respond, Bast grabbed my arm and hurried me toward the security checkpoint. "Don't look back," she said under her breath.

As soon as we turned the corner, Bast pulled me aside by the vending machines.

"The Set animal is close," she said. "We've got a few minutes at best. What's wrong with Sadie?"

"She can't…" I stammered. "I don't know exactly."

"Well, we'll have to figure it out on the plane."

"How did you change clothes?" I asked. "And the document for the bird…"

She waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, mortal minds are weak. That 'document' is an empty ticket sleeve. And my clothes haven't really changed. It's just a glamour."

I looked at her more closely, and I saw she was right. Her new clothes flickered like a mirage over her usual leopard-skin bodysuit. As soon as she pointed it out, the magic seemed flimsy and obvious.

"We'll try to make it to the gate before the Set animal," she said. "It will be easier if you stow your things in the Duat."

"What?"

"You don't really want to tote that box around under your arm, do you? Use the Duat as a storage bin."

"How?"

Bast rolled her eyes. "Honestly, what do they teach magicians these days?"

"We had about twenty seconds of training!"

“Just imagine a space in the air, like a shelf or a treasure chest—”

“A locker?” I asked. “I’ve never had a school locker.”

“Fine. Give it a combination lock—anything you want. Imagine opening the locker with your combination. Then shove the box inside. When you need it again, just call it to mind, and it will appear.”

I was skeptical, but I imagined a locker. I gave it a combination: 13/32/33—retired numbers for the Lakers, obviously: Chamberlain, Johnson, Abdul-Jabbar. I held out my dad’s magic box and let it go, sure it would smash to the floor. Instead, the box disappeared.

“Cool,” I said. “Are you sure I can get it back?”

“No,” Bast said. “Now, come on!”

22. Leroy Meets the Locker of Doom

I'D NEVER GONE THROUGH SECURITY with a live bird of prey before. I thought it would cause a holdup, but instead the guards moved us into a special line. They checked our paperwork. Bast smiled a lot, flirted with the guards and told them they must be working out, and they waved us through. Bast's knives didn't set off the alarms, so maybe she'd stored them in the Duat. The guards didn't even try to put Sadie through the X-ray machine.

I was retrieving my shoes when I heard a scream from the other side of security.

Bast cursed in Egyptian. "We were too slow."

I looked back and saw the Set animal charging through the terminal, knocking passengers out of its way. Its weird rabbit ears swiveled back and forth. Foam dripped from its curved, toothy snout, and its forked tail lashed around, looking for something to sting.

"Moose!" a lady screamed. "Rabid moose!"

Everyone started screaming, running in different directions and blocking the Set animal's path.

"Moose?" I wondered.

Bast shrugged. "No telling what mortals will perceive. Now the idea will spread by power of suggestion."

Sure enough, more passengers started yelling "Moose!" and running around as the Set animal plowed through the lines and got tangled up in the stanchions. TSA officers surged forward, but the Set animal tossed them aside like rag dolls.

"Come on!" Bast told me.

"I can't just let it hurt these people."

"We can't stop it!"

But I didn't move. I wanted to believe Horus was giving me courage, or that maybe the past few days had finally woken up some dormant bravery gene I'd inherited from my parents. But the truth was scarier. This time, nobody was making me take a stand. I *wanted to do it.*

People were in trouble because of us. I *had* to fix it. I felt the same kind of instinct I felt when Sadie needed my help, like it was time for me to step up. And yes, it terrified me. But it also felt *right.*

"Go to the gate," I told Bast. "Take Sadie. I'll meet you there."

"What? Carter—"

"Go!" I imagined opening my invisible locker: 13/32/33. I reached out my hand, but not for my dad's magic box. I concentrated on something I'd lost in Luxor. It *had* to be there. For a moment, I felt nothing. Then my hand closed around a hard leather grip, and I pulled my sword out of nowhere.

Bast's eyes widened. "Impressive."

"Get moving," I said. "It's my turn to run interference."

"You realize it'll kill you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. Now, scat!"

Bast took off at top speed, Sadie flapping to stay balanced on her arm.

A shot rang out. I turned and saw the Set animal plow into a cop who'd just fired at its head to no effect. The poor cop flew backward and toppled over the metal detector gate.

"Hey, moose!" I screamed.

The Set animal locked its glowing eyes on me.

Well done! Horus said. *We will die with honor!*

Shut up, I thought.

I glanced behind me to make sure Bast and Sadie were out of sight. Then I approached the creature.

"So you've got no name?" I asked. "They couldn't think of one ugly enough?"

The creature snarled, stepping over the unconscious policeman.

"*Set animal* is too hard to say," I decided. "I'll call you Leroy."

Apparently, Leroy didn't like his name. He lunged.

I dodged his claws and managed to smack him in the snout with the flat of my blade, but that barely fazed him. Leroy backed up and charged again, slavering, baring his fangs. I slashed at his neck, but Leroy was too smart. He darted to the left and sank his teeth into my free arm. If it hadn't been for my makeshift leather armguard, I would've been minus one arm. As it was, Leroy's fangs still bit clear through the leather. Red-hot pain shot up my arm.

I yelled, and a primal surge of power coursed through my body. I felt myself rising off the ground and the golden aura of the hawk warrior forming around me. The Set animal's jaws were pried open so fast that it yelped and let go of my arm. I stood, now encased in a magical barrier twice my normal size, and kicked Leroy into the wall.

Good! said Horus. *Now dispatch the beast to the netherworld!*

Quiet, man. I'm doing all the work.

I was vaguely aware of security guards trying to regroup, yelling into their walkie-talkies and calling for help. Travelers were still screaming and running around. I heard a little girl shout: "Chicken man, get the moose!"

You know how hard it is to feel like an extreme falcon-headed combat machine when somebody calls you "chicken man"?

I raised my sword, which was now at the center of a ten-foot-long energy blade.

Leroy shook the dust off his cone-shaped ears, and came at me again. My armored form might've been powerful, but it was also clumsy and slow; moving it around felt like moving through Jell-O. Leroy dodged my sword strike and landed on my chest, knocking me down. He was a lot heavier than he looked. His tail and claws raked against my armor. I caught his neck in my glowing fists and tried to keep his fangs away from my face, but everywhere he drooled, my magical shield hissed and steamed. I could feel my wounded arm going numb.

Alarms blared. More passengers crowded toward the checkpoint to see what was happening. I had to end this soon—before I passed out from pain or more mortals got hurt.

I felt my strength fading, my shield flickering. Leroy's fangs were an inch from my face, and Horus was offering no words of encouragement.

Then I thought about my invisible locker in the Duat. I wondered if other things could be put in there too…large, evil things.

I closed my hands around Leroy's throat and wedged my knee against his rib cage. Then I imagined an opening in the Duat—in the air right above me: 13/32/33. I imagined my locker opening as wide as it could go.

With my last bit of strength, I pushed Leroy straight up. He flew toward the ceiling, his eyes widening with surprise as he passed through an unseen rift and disappeared.

"Where'd it go?" someone yelled.

"Hey, kid!" another guy called. "You okay?"

My energy shield was gone. I wanted to pass out, but I had to leave before the security guys came out of their shock and arrested me for moose fighting. I got to my feet and threw my sword at the ceiling. It disappeared into the Duat. Then I wrapped the torn leather around my bleeding arm as best I could and ran for the gates.

I reached our flight just as they were closing the door.

Apparently, word of the chicken man incident hadn't spread quite yet. The gate agent gestured back toward the checkpoint as she took my ticket. "What's all the noise up there?"

"A moose got through security," I said. "It's under control now." Before she could ask questions, I raced down the jetway.

I collapsed into my seat across the aisle from Bast. Sadie, still in kite form, was pacing in the window seat next to me.

Bast let out a huge sigh of relief. "Carter, you made it! But you're hurt. What happened?"

I told her.

Bast's eyes widened. "You put the Set animal in your locker? Do you know how much strength that requires?"

"Yeah," I said. "I was there."

The flight attendant started making her announcements. Apparently, the security incident hadn't affected our flight. The plane pushed back from the gate on time.

I doubled forward in pain, and only then did Bast notice how bad my arm was. Her expression turned grim.

"Hold still." She whispered something in Egyptian, and my eyes began to feel heavy.

"You'll need sleep to heal that wound," she said.

"But if Leroy comes back—"

"Who?"

"Nothing."

Bast studied me as if seeing me for the first time. "That was extraordinarily brave, Carter. Facing the Set monster—you have more tomcat in you than I realized."

"*Um*—thanks?"

She smiled and touched my forehead. "We'll be in the air soon, my tomcat. Sleep."

I couldn't really object. Exhaustion washed over me, and I closed my eyes.

Naturally my soul decided to take a trip.

I was in *ba* form, circling above Phoenix. It was a brilliant winter morning. The cool desert air felt good under my wings. The city looked different in the daylight—a vast grid of beige and green squares dotted with palm trees and swimming pools. Stark mountains rose up here and there like chunks of the moon. The most prominent mountain was right below me—a long ridge with two distinct peaks. What had Set's minion called it on my first soul visit? Camelback Mountain.

Its foothills were crowded with luxury homes, but the top was barren. Something caught my attention: a crevice between two large boulders, and a shimmer of heat coming from deep within the mountain—something that no human eye would've noticed.

I folded my wings and dove toward the crevice.

Hot air vented out with such force that I had to push my way through. About fifty feet down, the crevice opened up, and I found myself in a place that simply couldn't exist.

The entire inside of the mountain had been hollowed out. In the middle of the cavern, a giant pyramid was under construction. The air rang with the sound of pickaxes. Hordes of demons cut blood-red limestone into blocks and hauled it to the middle of the cave, where more swarms of demons used ropes and ramps to hoist the blocks into place, the way my dad said the Giza pyramids were built. But the Giza pyramids had taken, like, twenty years each to complete. This pyramid was already halfway done.

There was something odd about it, too—and not just the blood-red color. When I looked at it I felt a familiar tingle, as if the whole structure were humming with a tone…no, a *voice* I almost recognized.

I spotted a smaller shape floating in the air above the pyramid—a reed barge like Uncle Amos's riverboat. On it stood two figures. One was a tall demon in leather armor. The other was a burly man in red combat fatigues.

I circled closer, trying to stay in the shadows because I wasn't sure I was really invisible. I landed on the top of the mast. It was a tricky maneuver, but neither of the boat's occupants looked up.

"How much longer?" asked the man in red.

He had Set's voice, but he looked completely different than he had in my last vision. He wasn't a slimy black thing, and he wasn't on fire—except for the scary mixture of hatred and amusement burning in his eyes. He had a big thick body like a linebacker's, with meaty hands and a brutish face. His short bristly hair and trimmed goatee were as red as his combat fatigues. I'd never seen camouflage that color before. Maybe he was planning on hiding out in a volcano.

Next to him, the demon bowed and scraped. It was the weird rooster-footed guy I'd seen before. He was at least seven feet tall and scarecrow thin, with bird talons for feet. And unfortunately, this time I could see his face. It was almost too hideous to describe. You know those anatomy exhibits where they show dead bodies without skin? Imagine one of those faces alive, only with solid black eyes and fangs.

"We're making excellent progress, master!" the demon promised. "We conjured a hundred more

demons today. With luck, we will be done at sunset on your birthday!"

"That is unacceptable, Face of Horror," Set said calmly.

The servant flinched. I guessed his name was Face of Horror. I wondered how long it had taken his mom to think of that. *Bob? No. Sam? No. How about Face of Horror?*

"B-but, master," Face stammered. "I thought—"

"Do not think, demon. Our enemies are more resourceful than I imagined. They have temporarily disabled my favorite pet and are now speeding toward us. We must finish before they arrive. *Sunrise* on my birthday, Face of Horror. No later. It will be the dawn of my new kingdom. I will scour all life from this continent, and this pyramid shall stand as a monument to my power—the final and eternal tomb of Osiris!"

My heart almost stopped. I looked down at the pyramid again, and I realized why it felt so familiar. It had an energy to it—*my father's* energy. I can't explain how, but I knew his sarcophagus lay hidden somewhere inside that pyramid.

Set smiled cruelly, as if he would be just as happy to have Face obey him or to rip Face to pieces. "You understand my order?"

"Yes, lord!" Face of Horror shifted his bird feet, as if building up his courage. "But may I ask, lord…why stop there?"

Set's nostrils flared. "You are one sentence away from destruction, Face of Horror. Choose your next words carefully."

The demon ran his black tongue across his teeth. "Well, my lord, is the annihilation of only one god worthy of your glorious self? What if we could create even more chaos energy—to feed your pyramid for all time and make you the eternal lord of all worlds?"

A hungry light danced in Set's eyes. "'Lord of all worlds'…that has a nice ring to it. And how would you accomplish this, puny demon?"

"Oh, not I, my lord. I am an insignificant worm. But if we were to capture the others: Nephthys—"

Set kicked Face in the chest, and the demon collapsed, wheezing. "I told you never to speak her name."

"Yes, master," Face panted. "Sorry, master. But if we were to capture her, and the others…think on the power you could consume. With the right plan…"

Set began nodding, warming to the idea. "I think it's time we put Amos Kane to use."

I tensed. Was Amos here?

"Brilliant, master. A brilliant plan."

"Yes, I'm glad I thought of it. Soon, Face of Horror, *very* soon, Horus, Isis, and my treacherous wife will bow at my feet—and Amos will help. We'll have a nice little family reunion."

Set looked up—straight at me, as if he'd known I was there all along, and gave me that rip-you-to-pieces smile. "Isn't that right, boy?"

I wanted to spread my wings and fly. I had to get out of the cavern and warn Sadie. But my wings wouldn't work. I sat there paralyzed as Set reached out to grab me.

S A D I E

23. Professor Thoth's Final Exam

SADIE HERE. SORRY FOR THE DELAY, though I don't suppose you'd notice on a recording. My nimble-fingered brother dropped the microphone into a pit full of…oh, never mind. Back to the story.

Carter woke with such a start, he banged his knees against the drinks tray, which was quite funny.

"Sleep well?" I asked.

He blinked at me in confusion. "You're human."

"How kind of you to notice."

I took another bite of my pizza. I'd never eaten pizza from a china plate or had a Coke in a glass (with ice no less—Americans are so odd) but I was enjoying first class.

"I changed back an hour ago." I cleared my throat. "It—ah—was helpful, what you said, about focusing on what's important."

Awkward saying even that much, as I remembered everything he'd told me while I was in kite form about his travels with Dad—how he'd gotten lost in the Underground, gotten sick in Venice, squealed like a baby when he'd found a scorpion in his sock. So much ammunition to tease him with, but oddly I wasn't tempted. The way he'd poured out his soul… Perhaps he thought I didn't understand him in kite form—but he'd been so honest, so unguarded, and he'd done it all to calm me down. If he hadn't given me something to focus on, I'd probably still be hunting field mice over the Potomac.

Carter had spoken about Dad as if their travels together had been a great thing, yes, but also quite a chore, with Carter always struggling to please and be on his best behavior, with no one to relax with, or talk to. Dad *was,* I had to admit, quite a presence. You'd be hard-pressed *not* to want his approval. (No doubt that's where I get my own stunningly charismatic personality.) I saw him only twice a year, and even so I had to prepare myself mentally for the experience. For the first time, I began to wonder if Carter really had the better end of the bargain. Would I trade my life for his?

I also decided not to tell him what had finally changed me back to human. I hadn't focused on Dad at all. I'd imagined Mum alive, imagined us walking down Oxford Street together, gazing in the shop windows and talking and laughing—the kind of ordinary day we'd never gotten to share. An impossible wish, I know. But it had been powerful enough to remind me of who I was.

Didn't say any of that, but Carter studied my face, and I sensed that he picked up my thoughts a little too well.

I took a sip of Coke. "You missed lunch, by the way."

"You didn't try to wake me?"

On the other side of the aisle, Bast burped. She'd just finished off her plate of salmon and was

looking quite satisfied. “I could summon more Friskies,” she offered. “Or cheese sandwiches.”

“No thanks,” Carter muttered. He looked devastated.

“God, Carter,” I said. “If it’s that important to you, I’ve got some pizza left—”

“It’s not that,” he said. And he told us how his *ba* had almost been captured by Set.

The news gave me trouble breathing. I felt as if I were stuck in kite form again, unable to think clearly. Dad trapped in a red pyramid? Poor Amos used as some sort of pawn? I looked at Bast for some kind of reassurance. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

Her expression was grim. “Sadie, I don’t know. Set will be most powerful on his birthday, and sunrise is the most auspicious moment for magic. If he’s able to generate one great explosion of storm energy at sunrise on that day—using not only his own magic, but augmenting it with the power of other gods he’s managed to enslave…the amount of chaos he could unleash is almost unimaginable.” She shuddered. “Carter, you say a simple demon gave him this idea?”

“Sounded like it,” Carter said. “Or he tweaked the original plan, anyway.”

She shook her head. “This is not like Set.”

I coughed. “What do you mean? It’s *exactly* like him.”

“No,” Bast insisted. “This is horrendous, even for him. Set wishes to be king, but such an explosion might leave him nothing to rule. It’s almost as if…” She stopped herself, the thought seemingly too disturbing. “I don’t understand it, but we’ll be landing soon. You’ll have to ask Thoth.”

“You make it sound like you’re not coming,” I said.

“Thoth and I don’t get along very well. Your chances of surviving might be better—”

The seat belt light came on. The captain announced we’d started our descent into Memphis. I peered out the window and saw a vast brown river cutting across the landscape—a river larger than any I’d ever seen. It reminded me uncomfortably of a giant snake.

The flight attendant came by and pointed to my lunch plate. “Finished, dear?”

“It seems so,” I told her gloomily.

Memphis hadn’t gotten word that it was winter. The trees were green and the sky was a brilliant blue.

We’d insisted Bast not “borrow” a car this time, so she agreed to rent one as long as she got a convertible. I didn’t ask where she got the money, but soon we were cruising through the mostly deserted streets of Memphis with our BMW’s top down.

I remember only snapshots of the city. We passed through one neighborhood that might’ve been a set from *Gone with the Wind*—big white mansions on enormous lawns shaded by cypress trees, although the plastic Santa Claus displays on the rooftops rather ruined the effect. On the next block, we almost got killed by an old woman driving a Cadillac out of a church parking lot. Bast swerved and honked her horn, and the woman just smiled and waved. Southern hospitality, I suppose.

After a few more blocks, the houses turned to rundown shacks. I spotted two African American boys wearing jeans and muscle shirts, sitting on their front porch, strumming acoustic guitars and singing. They sounded so good, I was tempted to stop.

On the next corner stood a cinder block restaurant with a hand-painted sign that read chicken & waffles. There was a queue of twenty people outside.

“You Americans have the strangest taste. What planet is this?” I asked.

Carter shook his head. “And where would Thoth be?”

Bast sniffed the air and turned left onto a street called Poplar. “We’re getting close. If I know Thoth, he’ll find a center of learning. A library, perhaps, or a cache of books in a magician’s tomb.”

“Don’t have a lot of those in Tennessee,” Carter guessed.

Then I spotted a sign and grinned broadly. “The University of Memphis, perhaps?”

“Well done, Sadie!” Bast purred.

Carter scowled at me. The poor boy gets jealous, you know.

A few minutes later, we were strolling through the campus of a small college: red brick buildings and wide courtyards. It was eerily quiet, except for the sound of a ball echoing on concrete.

As soon as Carter heard it, he perked up. “Basketball.”

“Oh, please,” I said. “We need to find Thoth.”

But Carter followed the sound of the ball, and we followed him. He rounded the corner of a building and froze. “Let’s ask them.”

I didn’t understand what he was on about. Then I turned the corner and yelped. On the basketball court, five players were in the middle of an intense game. They wore an assortment of jerseys from different American teams, and they all seemed keen to win—grunting and snarling at each other, stealing the ball and pushing.

Oh…and the players were all baboons.

“The sacred animal of Thoth,” Bast said. “We must be in the right place.”

One of the baboons had lustrous golden hair much lighter than the others, and a more, er, colorful bottom. He wore a purple jersey that seemed oddly familiar.

“Is that…a Lakers jersey?” I asked, hesitant to even name Carter’s silly obsession.

He nodded, and we both grinned.

“Khufu!” we yelled.

True, we hardly knew the baboon. We’d spent less than a day with him, and our time at Amos’s mansion seemed like ages ago, but still I felt like we’d recovered a long-lost friend.

Khufu jumped into my arms and barked at me. *“Agh! Agh!”* He picked through my hair, looking for bugs, I suppose [No comments from you, Carter!], and dropped to the ground, slapping the pavement to show how pleased he was.

Bast laughed. “He says you smell like flamingos.”

“You speak Baboon?” Carter asked.

The goddess shrugged. “He also wants to know where you’ve been.”

“Where *we’ve* been?” I said. “Well, first off, tell him I’ve spent the better part of the day as a kite, which is *not* a flamingo and does not end in *-o,* so it shouldn’t be on his diet. Secondly—”

“Hold on.” Bast turned to Khufu and said, *“Agh!”* Then she looked back at me. “All right, go ahead.”

I blinked. “Okay…*um,* and secondly, where has *he* been?”

She relayed this in a single grunt.

Khufu snorted and grabbed the basketball, which sent his baboon friends into a frenzy of barking

and scratching and snarling.

"He dove into the river and swam back," Bast translated, "but when he returned, the house was destroyed and we were gone. He waited a day for Amos to return, but he never did. So Khufu made his way to Thoth. Baboons are under his protection, after all."

"Why is that?" Carter asked. "I mean, no offense, but Thoth is the god of knowledge, right?"

"Baboons are very wise animals," Bast said.

"Agh!" Khufu picked his nose, then turned his Technicolor bum our direction. He threw his friends the ball. They began to fight over it, showing one another their fangs and slapping their heads.

"Wise?" I asked.

"Well, they're not *cats*, mind you," Bast added. "But, yes, wise. Khufu says that as soon as Carter keeps his promise, he'll take you to the professor."

I blinked. "The prof— Oh, you mean…right."

"What promise?" Carter asked.

The corner of Bast's mouth twitched. "Apparently, you promised to show him your basketball skills."

Carter's eyes widened in alarm. "We don't have time!"

"Oh, it's fine," Bast promised. "It's best that I go now."

"But where, Bast?" I asked, as I wasn't anxious to be separated from her again. "How will we find you?"

The look in her eyes changed to something like guilt, as if she'd just caused a horrible accident. "I'll find you when you get out, if you get out…."

"What do you mean *if*?" Carter asked, but Bast had already turned into Muffin and raced off.

Khufu barked at Carter most insistently. He tugged his hand, pulling him onto the court. The baboons immediately broke into two teams. Half took off their jerseys. Half left them on. Carter, sadly, was on the no-jersey team, and Khufu helped him pull his shirt off, exposing his bony chest. The teams began to play.

Now, I know nothing about basketball. But I'm fairly sure one isn't supposed to trip over one's shoes, or catch a pass with one's forehead, or dribble (is that the word?) with both hands as if petting a possibly rabid dog. But that is exactly the way Carter played. The baboons simply ran him over, quite literally. They scored basket after basket as Carter staggered back and forth, getting hit with the ball whenever it came close to him, tripping over monkey limbs until he was so dizzy he turned in a circle and fell over. The baboons stopped playing and watched him in disbelief. Carter lay in the middle of the court, covered in sweat and panting. The other baboons looked at Khufu. It was quite obvious what they were thinking: *Who invited this human?* Khufu covered his eyes in shame.

"Carter," I said with glee, "all that talk about basketball and the Lakers, and you're absolute *rubbish*! Beaten by monkeys!"

He groaned miserably. "It was…it was Dad's favorite game."

I stared at him. Dad's favorite game. God, why hadn't that occurred to me?

Apparently he took my gobsmacked expression as further criticism.

"I…I can tell you any NBA stat you want," he said a bit desperately. "Rebounds, assists, free

throw percentages."

The other baboons went back to their game, ignoring Carter and Khufu both. Khufu let out a disgusted noise, half gag and half bark.

I understood the sentiment, but I came forward and offered Carter my hand. "Come on, then. It *doesn't* matter."

"If I had better shoes," he suggested. "Or if I wasn't so tired—"

"Carter," I said with a smirk. "It *doesn't* matter. And I'll not breathe a word to Dad when we save him."

He looked at me with obvious gratitude. (Well, I am rather wonderful, after all.) Then he took my hand, and I hoisted him up.

"Now for god's sake, put on your shirt," I said. "And Khufu, it's time you took us to the professor."

Khufu led us into a deserted science building. The air in the hallways smelled of vinegar, and the empty classroom labs looked like something from an American high school, not the sort of place a god would hang out. We climbed the stairs and found a row of professors' offices. Most of the doors were closed. One had been left open, revealing a space no bigger than a broom closet stuffed with books, a tiny desk, and one chair. I wondered if that professor had done something bad to get such a small office.

"Agh!" Khufu stopped in front of a polished mahogany door, much nicer than the others. A newly stenciled name glistened on the glass: Dr. Thoth.

Without knocking, Khufu opened the door and waddled inside.

"After you, chicken man," I said to Carter. (And yes, I'm sure he was regretting telling me about that particular incident. After all, I couldn't *completely* stop teasing him. I have a reputation to maintain.)

I expected another broom closet. Instead, the office was impossibly big.

The ceiling rose at least ten meters, with one side of the office all windows, looking out over the Memphis skyline. Metal stairs led up to a loft dominated by an enormous telescope, and from somewhere up there came the sound of an electric guitar being strummed quite badly. The other walls of the office were crammed with bookshelves. Worktables overflowed with weird bits and bobs—chemistry sets, half-assembled computers, stuffed animals with electrical wires sticking out of their heads. The room smelled strongly of cooked beef, but with a smokier, tangier scent than I'd ever smelled.

Strangest of all, right in front of us, half a dozen longnecked birds—ibises—sat behind desks like receptionists, typing on laptop computers with their beaks.

Carter and I looked at each other. For once I was at a loss for words.

"Agh!" Khufu called out.

Up in the loft, the strumming stopped. A lanky man in his twenties stood up, electric guitar in hand. He had an unruly mane of blond hair like Khufu's, and he wore a stained white lab coat over faded jeans and a black T-shirt. At first I thought blood was trickling from the corner of his mouth. Then I realized it was some sort of meat sauce.

"Fascinating." He broke into a wide grin. "I've discovered something, Khufu. This is *not*

Memphis, Egypt."

Khufu gave me a sideways look, and I could swear his expression meant, *Duh.*

"I've also discovered a new form of magic called blues music," the man continued. "And barbecue. Yes, you must try barbecue."

Khufu looked unimpressed. He climbed to the top of a bookshelf, grabbed a box of Cheerios, and began to munch.

The guitar man slid down the banister with perfect balance and landed in front of us. "Isis and Horus," he said. "I see you've found new bodies."

His eyes were a dozen colors, shifting like a kaleidoscope, with hypnotic effect.

I managed to stutter, "*Um,* we're not—"

"Oh, I see," he said. "Trying to share the body, eh? Don't think I'm fooled for a minute, Isis. I know you're in charge."

"But she's not!" I protested. "My name is Sadie Kane. I assume you're Thoth?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You claim not to know me? Of course I'm Thoth. Also called Djehuti. Also called—"

I stifled a laugh. "Ja-hooty?"

Thoth looked offended. "In Ancient Egyptian, it's a perfectly fine name. The Greeks called me Thoth. Then later they confused me with their god Hermes. Even had the nerve to rename my sacred city Hermopolis, though we're nothing alike. Believe me, if you've ever met Hermes—"

"Agh!" Khufu yelled through a mouthful of Cheerios.

"You're right," Thoth agreed. "I'm getting off track. So you claim to be Sadie Kane. And…" He swung a finger toward Carter, who was watching the ibises type on their laptops. "I suppose you're not Horus."

"Carter Kane," said Carter, still distracted by the ibises' screens. "What *is* that?"

Thoth brightened. "Yes, they're called computers. Marvelous, aren't they? Apparently—"

"No, I mean what are the birds typing?" Carter squinted and read from the screen. "'A Short Treatise on the Evolution of Yaks'?"

"My scholarly essays," Thoth explained. "I try to keep several projects going at once. For instance, did you know this university does not offer majors in astrology or leechcraft? Shocking! I intend to change that. I'm renovating new headquarters right now down by the river. Soon Memphis will be a true center of learning!"

"That's brilliant," I said halfheartedly. "We need help defeating Set."

The ibises stopped typing and stared at me.

Thoth wiped the barbecue sauce off his mouth. "You have the nerve to ask this after last time?"

"Last time?" I repeated.

"I have the account here somewhere…." Thoth patted the pockets of his lab coat. He pulled out a rumpled piece of paper and read it. "No, grocery list."

He tossed it over his shoulder. As soon as the paper hit the floor, it became a loaf of wheat bread, a jug of milk, and a six-pack of Mountain Dew.

Thoth checked his sleeves. I realized the stains on his coat were smeared words, printed in

every language. The stains moved and changed, forming hieroglyphs, English letters, Demotic symbols. He brushed a stain off his lapel and seven letters fluttered to the floor, forming a word: *crawdad*. The word morphed into a slimy crustacean, like a shrimp, which wiggled its legs for only a moment before an ibis snapped it up.

"Ah, never mind," Thoth said at last. "I'll just tell you the short version: To avenge his father, Osiris, Horus challenged Set to a duel. The winner would become king of the gods."

"Horus won," Carter said.

"You do remember!"

"No, I read about it."

"And do you remember that without my help, Isis and you both would've died? Oh, I tried to mediate a solution to prevent the battle. That is one of my jobs, you know: to keep balance between order and chaos. But no-o-o, Isis convinced me to help your side because Set was getting too powerful. And the battle almost destroyed the world."

He complains too much, Isis said inside my head. *It wasn't so bad.*

"No?" Thoth demanded, and I got the feeling he could hear her voice as well as I could. "Set stabbed out Horus's eye."

"Ouch." Carter blinked.

"Yes, and I replaced it with a new eye made of moonlight. The Eye of Horus—your famous symbol. That was *me,* thank you very much. And when you cut off Isis's head—"

"Hold up." Carter glanced at me. "I cut off her *head*?"

I got better, Isis assured me.

"Only because I healed you, Isis!" Thoth said. "And yes, Carter, Horus, whatever you call yourself, you were so mad, you cut off her head. You were reckless, you see—about to charge Set while you were still weak, and Isis tried to stop you. That made you so angry you took your sword—Well, the point is, you almost destroyed each other before you could defeat Set. If you start another fight with the Red Lord, beware. He will use chaos to turn you against each other."

We'll defeat him again, Isis promised. *Thoth is just jealous.*

"Shut up," Thoth and I said at the same time.

He looked at me with surprise. "So, Sadie…you *are* trying to stay in control. It won't last. You may be blood of the pharaohs, but Isis is a deceptive, power-hungry—"

"I can contain her," I said, and I had to use all my will to keep Isis from blurting out a string of insults.

Thoth fingered the frets of his guitar. "Don't be so sure. Isis probably told you she helped defeat Set. Did she also tell you she was the reason Set got out of control in the first place? She exiled our first king."

"You mean Ra?" Carter said. "Didn't he get old and decide to leave the earth?"

Thoth snorted. "He was old, yes, but he was *forced* to leave. Isis got tired of waiting for him to retire. She wanted her husband, Osiris, to become king. She also wanted more power. So one day, while Ra was napping, Isis secretly collected a bit of the sun god's drool."

"Eww," I said. "Since when does drool make you powerful?"

Thoth scowled at me accusingly. "You mixed the spit with clay to create a poisonous snake. That night, the serpent slipped into Ra's bedroom and bit him on the ankle. No amount of magic, even mine, could heal him. He would've died—"

"Gods can die?" Carter asked.

"Oh, yes," Thoth said. "Of course most of the time we rise again from the Duat—eventually. But this poison ate away at Ra's very being. Isis, of course, acted innocent. She cried to see Ra in pain. She tried to help with her magic. Finally she told Ra there was only one way to save him: Ra must tell her his secret name."

"Secret name?" I asked. "Like Bruce Wayne?"

"Everything in Creation has a secret name," Thoth said. "Even gods. To know a being's secret name is to have power over that creature. Isis promised that with Ra's secret name, she could heal him. Ra was in so much pain, he agreed. And Isis healed him."

"But it gave her power over him," Carter guessed.

"Extreme power," Thoth agreed. "She forced Ra to retreat into the heavens, opening the way for her beloved, Osiris, to become the new king of the gods. Set had been an important lieutenant to Ra, but he could not bear to see his brother Osiris become king. This made Set and Osiris enemies, and here we are five millennia later, still fighting that war, all because of Isis."

"But that's not my fault!" I said. "I would never do something like that."

"Wouldn't you?" Thoth asked. "Wouldn't you do anything to save your family, even if it upset the balance of the cosmos?"

His kaleidoscope eyes locked on mine, and I felt a surge of defiance. Well, why shouldn't I help my family? Who was this nutter in a lab coat telling me what I could and couldn't do?

Then I realized I didn't know who was thinking that: Isis or me. Panic started building in my chest. If I couldn't tell my own thoughts from those of Isis, how long before I went completely mad?

"No, Thoth," I croaked. "You have to believe me. I'm in control—me, Sadie—and I need your help. Set has our father."

I let it spill out, then—everything from the British Museum to Carter's vision of the red pyramid. Thoth listened without comment, but I could swear new stains developed on his lab coat as I talked, as if some of my words were being added to the mix.

"Just look at something for us," I finished. "Carter, hand him the book."

Carter rummaged through his bag and brought out the book we'd stolen in Paris. "You wrote this, right?" he said. "It tells how to defeat Set."

Thoth unfolded the papyrus pages. "Oh, dear. I hate reading my old work. Look at this sentence. I'd never write it that way now." He patted his lab coat pockets. "Red pen—does anyone have one?"

Isis chafed against my willpower, insisting that we blast some sense into Thoth. *One fireball,* she pleaded. *Just one enormous magical fireball, please?*

I can't say I wasn't tempted, but I kept her under control.

"Look, Thoth," I said. "Ja-hooty, whatever. Set is about to destroy North America at the very least, possibly the world. Millions of people will die. You said you care about balance. Will you help us or not?"

For a moment, the only sounds were ibis beaks tapping on keyboards.

"You *are* in trouble," Thoth agreed. "So let me ask, why do you think your father put you in this position? Why did he release the gods?"

I almost said, *To bring back Mum.* But I didn't believe that anymore.

"My mum saw the future," I guessed. "Something bad was coming. I think she and Dad were trying to stop it. They thought the only way was to release the gods."

"Even though using the power of the gods is incredibly dangerous for mortals," Thoth pressed, "and against the law of the House of Life—a law that I convinced Iskandar to make, by the way."

I remembered something the old Chief Lector had told me in the Hall of Ages. "Gods have great power, but only humans have creativity." "I think my mum convinced Iskandar that the rule was wrong. Maybe he couldn't admit it publicly, but she made him change his mind. Whatever is coming—it's so bad, gods and mortals are going to need each other."

"And what is coming?" Thoth asked. "The rise of Set?" His tone was coy, like a teacher trying a trick question.

"Maybe," I said carefully, "but I don't know."

Up on the bookshelf, Khufu belched. He bared his fangs in a messy grin.

"You have a point, Khufu," Thoth mused. "She does not sound like Isis. Isis would never admit she doesn't know something."

I had to clamp a mental hand over Isis's mouth.

Thoth tossed the book back to Carter. "Let's see if you act as well as you talk. I will explain the spell book, provided you prove to me that you truly have control of your gods, that you're not simply repeating the same old patterns."

"A test?" Carter said. "We accept."

"Now, hang on," I protested. Maybe being homeschooled, Carter didn't realize that "test" is normally a bad thing.

"Wonderful," Thoth said. "There is an item of power I require from a magician's tomb. Bring it to me."

"Which magician's tomb?" I asked.

But Thoth took a piece of chalk from his lab coat and scribbled something in the air. A doorway opened in front of him.

"How did you do that?" I asked. "Bast said we can't summon portals during the Demon Days."

"Mortals can't," Thoth agreed. "But a god of magic can. If you succeed, we'll have barbecue."

The doorway pulled us into a black void, and Thoth's office disappeared.

SADIE

24. I Blow Up Some Blue Suede Shoes

"WHERE ARE WE?" I ASKED.

We stood on a deserted avenue outside the gates of a large estate. We still seemed to be in Memphis—at least the trees, the weather, the afternoon light were all the same.

The estate must've been several acres at least. The white metal gates were done in fancy designs of silhouetted guitar players and musical notes. Beyond them, the driveway curved through the trees up to a two-story house with a white-columned portico.

"Oh, no," Carter said. "I recognize those gates."

"What? Why?"

"Dad brought me here once. A great magician's tomb…Thoth has got to be kidding."

"Carter, what are you talking about? Is someone buried here?"

He nodded. "This is Graceland. Home to the most famous musician in the world."

"Michael Jackson lived here?"

"No, dummy," Carter said. "Elvis Presley."

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or curse. "Elvis Presley. You mean white suits with rhinestones, big slick hair, Gran's record collection—*that* Elvis?"

Carter looked around nervously. He drew his sword, even though we seemed to be totally alone. "This is where he lived and died. He's buried in back of the mansion."

I stared up at the house. "You're telling me Elvis was a magician?"

"Don't know." Carter gripped his sword. "Thoth did say something about music being a kind of magic. But something's not right. Why are we the only ones here? There's usually a mob of tourists."

"Christmas holidays?"

"But no security?"

I shrugged. "Maybe it's like what Zia did at Luxor. Maybe Thoth cleared everyone out."

"Maybe." But I could tell Carter was still uneasy. He pushed the gates, and they opened easily. "Not right," he muttered.

"No," I agreed. "But let's go pay our respects."

As we walked up the drive, I couldn't help thinking that the home of "the King" wasn't very impressive. Compared to some of the rich and famous homes I'd seen on TV, Elvis's place looked awfully small. It was just two stories high, with that white-columned portico and brick walls. Ridiculous plaster lions flanked the steps. Perhaps things were simpler back in Elvis's day, or maybe he spent all his money on rhinestone suits.

We stopped at the foot of the steps.

"So Dad brought you here?" I asked.

"Yeah." Carter eyed the lions as if expecting them to attack. "Dad loves blues and jazz, mostly, but he said Elvis was important because he took African American music and made it popular for white people. He helped invent rock and roll. Anyway, Dad and I were in town for a symposium or something. I don't remember. Dad insisted I come here."

"Lucky you." And yes, perhaps I was beginning to understand that Carter's life with Dad hadn't been all glamour and holiday, but still I couldn't help being a bit jealous. Not that I'd ever wanted to see Graceland, of course, but Dad had never insisted on taking me anywhere—at least until the British Museum trip when he disappeared. I hadn't even known Dad was an Elvis fan, which was rather horrifying.

We walked up the steps. The front door swung open all by itself.

"I don't like that," Carter said.

I turned to look behind us, and my blood went ice cold. I grabbed my brother's arm. "*Um,* Carter, speaking of things we don't like…"

Coming up the driveway were two magicians brandishing staffs and wands.

"Inside," Carter said. "Quick!"

I didn't have much time to admire the house. There was a dining room to our left and a living room–music room to our right, with a piano and a stained glass archway decorated with peacocks. All the furniture was roped off. The house smelled like old people.

"Item of power," I said. "Where?"

"I don't know," Carter snapped. "They didn't have 'items of power' listed on the tour!"

I glanced out the window. Our enemies were getting close. The bloke in front wore jeans, a black sleeveless shirt, boots, and a battered cowboy hat. He looked more like an outlaw than a magician. His friend was similarly dressed but much heftier, with tattooed arms, a bald head, and a scraggly beard. When they were ten meters away, the man with the cowboy hat lowered his staff, which morphed into a shotgun.

"Oh, please!" I yelled, and pushed Carter into the living room.

The blast shattered Elvis's front door and set my ears ringing. We scrambled to our feet and ran deeper into the house. We passed through an old-fashioned kitchen, then into the strangest den I'd ever seen. The back wall was made of vine-covered bricks, with a waterfall trickling down the side. The carpet was green shag (floor *and* ceiling, mind you) and the furniture was carved with creepy animal shapes. Just in case all that wasn't dreadful enough, plaster monkeys and stuffed lions had been strategically placed around the room. Despite the danger we were in, the place was so horrid, I just had to stop and marvel.

"God," I said. "Did Elvis have *no* taste?"

"The Jungle Room," Carter said. "He decorated it like this to annoy his dad."

"I can respect that."

Another shotgun blast roared through the house.

"Split up," Carter said.

"Bad idea!" I could hear the magicians tromping through the rooms, smashing things as they

came closer.

"I'll distract them," Carter said. "You search. The trophy room is through there."

"Carter!"

But the fool ran off to protect me. I *hate* it when he does that. I should have followed him, or run the other way, but I stood frozen in shock as he turned the corner with his sword raised, his body beginning to glow with a golden light…and everything went wrong.

Blam! An emerald flash brought Carter to his knees. For a heartbeat, I thought he'd been hit with the shotgun, and I had to stifle a scream. But immediately, Carter collapsed and began to shrink, clothes, sword and all—melting into a tiny sliver of green.

The lizard that used to be my brother raced toward me, climbed up my leg and into my palm, where it looked at me desperately.

From around the corner, a gruff voice said, "Split up and find the sister. She'll be somewhere close."

"Oh, Carter," I whispered fondly to the lizard. "I will *so* kill you for this."

I stuffed him in my pocket and ran.

The two magicians continued to smash and crash their way through Graceland, knocking over furniture and blasting things to bits. Apparently they were not Elvis fans.

I ducked under some ropes, crept through a hallway, and found the trophy room. Amazingly, it was full of trophies. Gold records crowded the walls. Rhinestone Elvis jumpsuits glittered in four glass cases. The room was dimly lit, probably to keep the jumpsuits from blinding visitors, and music played softly from overhead speakers: Elvis warning everyone not to step on his blue suede shoes.

I scanned the room but found nothing that looked magical. The suits? I hoped Thoth did not expect me to wear one. The gold records? Lovely Frisbees, but no.

"Jerrod!" a voice called to my right. A magician was coming down the hallway. I darted toward the other exit, but a voice just outside it called back, "Yeah, I'm over here."

I was surrounded.

"Carter," I whispered. "Curse your lizard brain."

He fluttered nervously in my pocket but was no help.

I fumbled through my magician's bag and grasped my wand. Should I try drawing a magic circle? No time, and I didn't want to duel toe-to-toe with two older magicians. I had to stay mobile. I took out my rod and willed it into a full-length staff. I could set it on fire, or turn it into a lion, but what good would that do? My hands started to tremble. I wanted to crawl into a ball and hide beneath Elvis's gold record collection.

Let me take over, Isis said. *I can turn our enemies to dust.*

No, I told her.

You will get us both killed.

I could feel her pressing against my will, trying to bust out. I could taste her anger with these magicians. How dare they challenge us? With a word, we could destroy them.

No, I thought again. Then I remembered something Zia had said: *Use whatever you have available.* The room was dimly lit…perhaps if I could make it darker.

"Darkness," I whispered. I felt a tugging sensation in my stomach, and the lights flickered off. The music stopped. The light continued to dim—even the sunlight faded from the windows until the entire room went black.

Somewhere to my left, the first magician sighed in exasperation. "Jerrod!"

"Wasn't me, Wayne!" Jerrod insisted. "You always blame me!"

Wayne muttered something in Egyptian, still moving towards me. I needed a distraction.

I closed my eyes and imagined my surroundings. Although it was pitch-black, I could still sense Jerrod in the hallway to my left, stumbling through the darkness. I sensed Wayne on the other side of the wall to the right, only a few steps from the doorway. And I could visualize the four glass display cases with Elvis's suits.

They're tossing your house, I thought. *Defend it!*

A stronger pull in my gut, as if I were lifting a heavy weight—then the display cases blew open. I heard the shuffling of stiff cloth, like sails in the wind, and was dimly aware of four pale white shapes in motion—two heading to either door.

Wayne yelled first as the empty Elvis suits tackled him. His shotgun lit up the dark. Then to my left, Jerrod shouted in surprise. A heavy *clump!* told me he'd been knocked over. I decided to go in Jerrod's direction—better an off-balance bloke than one with a shotgun. I slipped through the doorway and down a hall, leaving Jerrod scuffling behind me and yelling, "Get off! Get off!"

Take him while he's down, Isis urged. *Burn him to ashes!*

Part of me knew she had a point: if I left Jerrod in one piece, he would be up in no time and after me again; but it didn't seem right to hurt him, especially while he was being tackled by Elvis suits. I found a door and burst outside into the afternoon sunlight.

I was in the backyard of Graceland. A large fountain gurgled nearby, ringed by grave markers. One had a glass-encased flame at the top and was heaped with flowers. I took a wild guess: it must be Elvis's.

A magician's tomb.

Of course. We'd been searching the house, but the item of power would be at his gravesite. But what exactly *was* the item?

Before I could approach the grave, the door burst open. The big bald man with the straggly beard stumbled out. A tattered Elvis suit had its sleeves wrapped around his neck like it was getting a piggyback ride.

"Well, well." The magician threw off the jumpsuit. His voice confirmed for me that he was the one called Jerrod. "You're just a little girl. You've caused us a lot of trouble, missy."

He lowered his staff and fired a shot of green light. I raised my wand and deflected the bolt of energy straight up. I heard a surprised coo—the cry of a pigeon—and a newly made lizard fell out of the sky at my feet.

"Sorry," I told it.

Jerrod snarled and threw down his staff. Apparently, he specialized in lizards, because the staff morphed into a komodo dragon the size of a London taxicab.

The monster charged me with unnatural speed. It opened its jaws and would've bitten me in half, but I just had time to wedge my staff in its mouth.

Jerrod laughed. “Nice try, girl!”

I felt the dragon’s jaws pressing on the staff. It was only a matter of seconds before the wood snapped, and then I’d be a komodo dragon’s snack. *A little help,* I told Isis. Carefully, very carefully, I tapped in to her strength. Doing so without letting her take over was like riding a surfboard over a tidal wave, trying desperately to stay on my feet. I felt five thousand years of experience, knowledge, and power course through me. She offered me options, and I selected the simplest. I channeled power through my staff and felt it grow hot in my hands, glowing white. The dragon hissed and gurgled as my staff elongated, forcing the creature’s jaws open wider, wider, and then: *boom!*

The dragon shattered into kindling and sent the splintered remains of Jerrod’s staff raining down around me.

Jerrod had only a moment to look stunned before I threw my wand and whapped him solidly on the forehead. His eyes crossed, and he collapsed on the pavement. My wand returned to my hand.

That would’ve been a lovely happy ending…except I’d forgotten about Wayne. The cowboy-hatted magician stumbled out the door, almost tripping over his friend, but he recovered with lightning speed.

He shouted, “Wind!” and my staff flew out of my hands and into his.

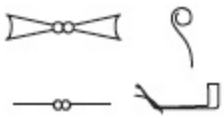
He smiled cruelly. “Well fought, darlin’. But elemental magic is always quickest.”

He struck the ends of both staffs, his and mine, against the pavement. A wave rippled over the dirt and pavement as if the ground had become liquid, knocking me off my feet and sending my wand flying. I scrambled backwards on hands and knees, but I could hear Wayne chanting, summoning fire from the staffs.

Rope, Isis said. *Every magician carries rope.*

Panic had made my mind go blank, but my hand instinctively went for my magic bag. I pulled out a small bit of twine. Hardly a rope, but it triggered a memory—something Zia had done in the New York museum. I threw the twine at Wayne and yelled a word Isis suggested: *“Tas!”*

A golden hieroglyph burned in the air over Wayne’s head:



The twine whipped toward him like an angry snake, growing longer and thicker as it flew. Wayne’s eyes widened. He stumbled back and sent jets of flame shooting from both staffs, but the rope was too quick. It lashed round his ankles and toppled him sideways, wrapping round his whole body until he was encased in a twine cocoon from chin to toes. He struggled and screamed and called me quite a few unflattering names.

I got up unsteadily. Jerrod was still out cold. I retrieved my staff, which had fallen next to Wayne. He continued straining against the twine and cursing in Egyptian, which sounded strange with an American Southern accent.

Finish him, Isis warned. *He can still speak. He will not rest until he destroys you.*

“Fire!” Wayne screamed. “Water! Cheese!”

Even the cheese command did not work. I reckoned his rage was throwing his magic off balance, making it impossible to focus, but I knew he would recover soon.

“Silence,” I said.

Wayne's voice abruptly stopped working. He kept screaming, but no sound came out.

"I'm not your enemy," I told him. "But I can't have you killing me, either."

Something wriggled in my pocket, and I remembered Carter. I took him out. He looked okay, except of course for the fact he was still a lizard.

"I'll try to change you back," I told him. "Hopefully I don't make things worse."

He made a little croak that didn't convey much confidence.

I closed my eyes and imagined Carter as he should be: a tall boy of fourteen, badly dressed, very human, very annoying. Carter began to feel heavy in my hands. I put him down and watched as the lizard grew into a vaguely human blob. By the count of three, my brother was lying on his stomach, his sword and pack next to him on the lawn.

He spit grass out of his mouth. "How'd you do that?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "You just seemed…wrong."

"Thanks a lot." He got up and checked to make sure he had all his fingers. Then he saw the two magicians and his mouth fell open. "What did you do to them?"

"Just tied one up. Knocked one out. Magic."

"No, I mean…" He faltered, searching for words, then gave up and pointed.

I looked at the magicians and yelped. Wayne wasn't moving. His eyes and mouth were open, but he wasn't blinking or breathing. Next to him, Jerrod looked just as frozen. As we watched, their mouths began to glow as if they'd swallowed matches. Two tiny yellow orbs of fire popped out from between their lips and shot into the air, disappearing in the sunlight.

"What—what was that?" I asked. "Are they dead?"

Carter approached them cautiously and put his hand on Wayne's neck. "It doesn't even feel like skin. More like rock."

"No, they were human! I didn't turn them to rock!"

Carter felt Jerrod's forehead where I'd whacked him with my wand. "It's cracked."

"What?"

Carter picked up his sword. Before I could even scream, he brought the hilt down on Jerrod's face and the magician's head cracked into shards like a flowerpot.

"They're made of clay," Carter said. "They're both *shabti*."

He kicked Wayne's arm and I heard it crunch under the twine.

"But they were casting spells," I said. "And talking. They were *real."*

As we watched, the *shabti* crumbled to dust, leaving nothing behind but my bit of twine, two staffs, and some grungy clothes.

"Thoth was testing us," Carter said. "Those balls of fire, though…" He frowned as if trying to recall something important.

"Probably the magic that animated them," I guessed. "Flying back to their master—like a recording of what they did?"

It sounded like a solid theory to me, but Carter seemed awfully troubled. He pointed to the blasted back door of Graceland. "Is the whole house like that?"

"Worse." I looked at the ruined Elvis jumpsuit under Jerrod's clothes and scattered rhinestones. Maybe Elvis had no taste, but I still felt bad about trashing the King's palace. If the place had been important to Dad… Suddenly an idea perked me up. "What was it Amos said, when he repaired that saucer?"

Carter frowned. "This is a whole house, Sadie. Not a saucer."

"Got it," I said. *"Hi-nehm!"*

A gold hieroglyphic symbol flickered to life in my palm.

I held it up and blew it towards the house. The entire outline of Graceland began to glow. The pieces of the door flew back into place and mended themselves. The tattered bits of Elvis clothing disappeared.

"Wow," Carter said. "Do you think the inside is fixed too?"

"I—" My vision blurred, and my knees buckled. I would've knocked my head on the pavement if Carter hadn't caught me.

"It's okay," he said. "You did a lot of magic, Sadie. That was amazing."

"But we haven't even found the item Thoth sent us for."

"Yeah," Carter said. "Maybe we have."

He pointed to Elvis's grave, and I saw it clearly: a memento left behind by some adoring fan—a necklace with a silver loop-topped cross, just like the one on Mum's T-shirt in my old photograph.

"An ankh," I said. "The Egyptian symbol for eternal life."

Carter picked it up. There was a small papyrus scroll attached to the chain.

"What's this?" he murmured, and unrolled the sheet. He stared at it so hard I thought he'd burn a hole in it.

"What?" I looked over his shoulder.

The painting looked quite ancient. It showed a golden, spotted cat holding a knife in one paw and chopping the head off a snake.

Beneath it, in black marker, someone had written: *Keep up the fight!*

"That's vandalism, isn't it?" I asked. "Marking up an ancient drawing like that? Rather an odd thing to leave for Elvis."

Carter didn't seem to hear. "I've seen this picture before. It's in a lot of tombs. Don't know why it never occurred to me…"

I studied the picture more closely. Something about it did seem rather familiar.

"You know what it means?" I asked.

"It's the Cat of Ra, fighting the sun god's main enemy, Apophis."

"The snake," I said.

"Yeah, Apophis was—"

"The embodiment of chaos," I said, remembering what Nut had said.

Carter looked impressed, as well he should have. "Exactly. Apophis was even worse than Set. The Egyptians thought Doomsday would come when Apophis ate the sun and destroyed all of Creation."

"But…the cat killed it," I said hopefully.

"The cat had to kill it over and over again," Carter said. "Like what Thoth said about repeating patterns. The thing is…I asked Dad one time if the cat had a name. And he said nobody knows for sure, but most people assume it's Sekhmet, this fierce lion goddess. She was called the Eye of Ra because she did his dirty work. He saw an enemy; she killed it."

"Fine. So?"

"So the cat doesn't look like Sekhmet. It just occurred to me…"

I finally saw it, and a shiver went down my back. "The Cat of Ra looks exactly like Muffin. It's Bast."

Just then the ground rumbled. The memorial fountain began to glow, and a dark doorway opened.

"Come on," I said. "I've got some questions for Thoth. And then I'm going to punch him in the beak."

25. We Win an All-Expenses-Paid Trip to Death

BEING TURNED INTO A LIZARD can really mess up your day. As we stepped through the doorway, I tried to hide it, but I was feeling pretty bad.

You're probably thinking: *Hey, you already turned into a falcon. What's the big deal?* But someone else *forcing* you into another form—that's totally different. Imagine yourself in a trash compactor, your entire body smashed into a shape smaller than your hand. It's painful and it's humiliating. Your enemy pictures you as a stupid harmless lizard, then imposes their will on you, overpowering your thoughts until you have to be what *they* want you to be. I guess it could've been worse. He could've pictured me as a fruit bat, but still…

Of course I felt grateful to Sadie for saving me, but I also felt like a complete loser. It was bad enough that I'd embarrassed myself on the basketball court with a troop of baboons. But I'd also totally failed in battle. Maybe I'd done okay with Leroy, the airport monster, but faced with a couple of magicians (even clay ones), I got turned into a reptile in the first two seconds. How would I stand a chance against Set?

I was shaken out of those thoughts when we emerged from the portal, because we were definitely not in Thoth's office.

In front of us loomed a life-size glass-and-metal pyramid, almost as big as the ones at Giza. The skyline of downtown Memphis rose up in the distance. At our backs were the banks of the Mississippi River.

The sun was setting, turning the river and the pyramid to gold. On the pyramid's front steps, next to a twenty-foot-tall pharaoh statue labeled RAMESSES THE GREAT, Thoth had set out a picnic with barbecued ribs and brisket, bread and pickles, the works. He was playing his guitar with a portable amp. Khufu stood nearby, covering his ears.

"Oh, good." Thoth strummed a chord that sounded like the death cry of a sick donkey. "You lived."

I stared up at the pyramid in amazement. "Where did this come from? You didn't just…build it, did you?" I remembered my *ba* trip to Set's red pyramid, and suddenly pictured gods building monuments all over the U.S.

Thoth chuckled. "I didn't have to build it. The people of Memphis did that. Humans never really forget Egypt, you know. Every time they build a city on the banks of a river, they remember their heritage, buried deep in their subconscious. This is the Pyramid Arena—sixth largest pyramid in the world. It used to be a sports arena for…what is that game you like, Khufu?"

"Agh!" Khufu said indignantly. And I swear he gave me a dirty look.

"Yes, basketball," Thoth said. "But the arena fell on hard times. It's been abandoned for years.

Well, no longer. I'm moving in. You do have the ankh?"

For a moment, I wondered if it had been such a good idea helping Thoth, but we needed him. I tossed him the necklace.

"Excellent," he said. "An ankh from the tomb of Elvis. Powerful magic!"

Sadie clenched her fists. "We almost died getting that. You tricked us."

"Not a trick," he insisted. "A test."

"Those *things,*" Sadie said, "the *shabti—"*

"Yes, my best work in centuries. A shame to break them, but I couldn't have you beating up on *real* magicians, could I? *Shabti* make excellent stunt doubles."

"So you saw the whole thing," I muttered.

"Oh, yes." Thoth held out his hand. Two little fires danced across his palm—the magic essences we'd seen escape from the *shabtis'* mouths. "These are…recording devices, I suppose you'd say. I got a full report. You defeated the *shabti* without killing. I must admit I'm impressed, Sadie. You controlled your magic and controlled Isis. And you, Carter, did well turning into a lizard."

I thought he was teasing me. Then I realized there was genuine sympathy in his eyes, as if my failure had also been some kind of test.

"You will find worse enemies ahead, Carter," he warned. "Even now, the House of Life sends its best against you. But you will also find friends where you least expect them."

I didn't know why, but I got the feeling he was talking about Zia…or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

Thoth stood and handed Khufu his guitar. He tossed the ankh at the statue of Ramesses, and the necklace fastened itself around the pharaoh's neck.

"There you are, Ramesses," Thoth said to the statue. "Here's to our new life."

The statue glowed faintly, as if the sunset had just gotten ten times brighter. Then the glow spread to the entire pyramid before slowly fading.

"Oh, yes," Thoth mused. "I think I'll be happy here. Next time you children visit me, I'll have a much bigger laboratory."

Scary thought, but I tried to stay focused.

"That's not all we found," I said. "You need to explain *this."*

I held out the painting of the cat and the snake.

"It's a cat and a snake," Thoth said.

"Thank you, god of wisdom. You placed it for us to find, didn't you? You're trying to give us some kind of clue."

"Who, me?"

Just kill him, Horus said.

Shut up, I said.

At least kill the guitar.

"The cat is Bast," I said, trying to ignore my inner psycho falcon. "Does this have something to do with why our parents released the gods?"

Thoth gestured toward the picnic plates. "Did I mention we have barbecue?"

Sadie stomped her foot. "We had a deal, Ja-hooty!"

"You know…I like that name," Thoth mused, "but not so much when *you* say it. I believe our deal was that I would explain how to use the spell book. May I?"

He held out his hand. Reluctantly I dug the magic book out of my bag and handed it over.

Thoth unfolded the pages. "Ah, this takes me back. So many formulae. In the old days, we believed in ritual. A good spell might take weeks to prepare, with exotic ingredients from all over the world."

"We don't have weeks," I said.

"Rush, rush, rush." Thoth sighed.

"Agh," Khufu agreed, sniffing the guitar.

Thoth closed the book and handed it back to me. "Well, it's an incantation for destroying Set."

"We *know* that," Sadie said. "Will it destroy him forever?"

"No, no. But it will destroy his form in this world, banishing him deep into the Duat and reducing his power so he will not be able to appear again for a long, long time. Centuries, most likely."

"Sounds good," I said. "How do we read it?"

Thoth stared at me like the answer should be obvious. "You cannot read it now because the words can only be spoken in Set's presence. Once before him, Sadie should open the book and recite the incantation. She'll know what to do when the time comes."

"Right," Sadie said. "And Set will just stand there calmly while I read him to death."

Thoth shrugged. "I did not say it would be easy. You'll also require two ingredients for the spell to work—a verbal ingredient, Set's secret name—"

"What?" I protested. "How are we supposed to get that?"

"With difficulty, I'd imagine. You can't simply read a secret name from a book. The name must come from the owner's own lips, in his own pronunciation, to give you power over him."

"Great," I said. "So we just force Set to tell us."

"Or trick him," Thoth said. "Or convince him."

"Isn't there any other way?" Sadie asked.

Thoth brushed an ink splotch off his lab coat. A hieroglyph turned into a moth and fluttered away. "I suppose…yes. You could ask the person closest to Set's heart—the person who loves him most. She would also have the ability to speak the name."

"But nobody loves Set!" Sadie said.

"His wife," I guessed. "That other goddess, Nephthys."

Thoth nodded. "She's a river goddess. Perhaps you could find her in a river."

"This just gets better and better," I muttered.

Sadie frowned at Thoth. "You said there was another ingredient?"

"A physical ingredient," Thoth agreed, "a feather of truth."

"A what?" Sadie asked.

But I knew what he was talking about, and my heart sank. "You mean from the Land of the Dead."

Thoth beamed. "Exactly."

"Wait," Sadie said. "What is he talking about?"

I tried to conceal my fear. "When you died in Ancient Egypt, you had to take a journey to the Land of the Dead," I explained. "A really *dangerous* journey. Finally, you made it to the Hall of Judgment, where your life was weighed on the Scales of Anubis: your heart on one side, the feather of truth on the other. If you passed the test, you were blessed with eternal happiness. If you failed, a monster ate your heart and you ceased to exist."

"Ammit the Devourer," Thoth said wistfully. "Cute little thing."

Sadie blinked. "So we're supposed to get a feather from this Hall of Judgment *how,* exactly?"

"Perhaps Anubis will be in a good mood," Thoth suggested. "It happens every thousand years or so."

"But how do we even get to the Land of the Dead?" I asked. "I mean…without dying."

Thoth gazed at the western horizon, where the sunset was turning blood-red. "Down the river at night, I should think. That's how most people pass into the Land of the Dead. I would take a boat. You'll find Anubis at the end of the river—" He pointed north, then changed his mind and pointed south. "Forgot, rivers flow south here. Everything is backward."

"Agh!" Khufu ran his fingers down the frets of the guitar and ripped out a massive rock 'n' roll riff. Then he belched as if nothing had happened and set down the guitar. Sadie and I just stared at him, but Thoth nodded as if the baboon had said something profound.

"Are you sure, Khufu?" Thoth asked.

Khufu grunted.

"Very well." Thoth sighed. "Khufu says he would like to go with you. I told him he could stay here and type my doctoral thesis on quantum physics, but he's not interested."

"Can't imagine why," Sadie said. "Glad to have Khufu along, but where do we find a boat?"

"You are the blood of pharaohs," Thoth said. "Pharaohs always have access to a boat. Just make sure you use it wisely."

He nodded toward the river. Churning toward the shore was an old-fashioned paddlewheel steamboat with smoke billowing from its stacks.

"I wish you a good journey," Thoth said. "Until we meet again."

"We're supposed to take *that?"* I asked. But when I turned to look at Thoth, he was gone, and he'd taken the barbecue with him.

"Wonderful," Sadie muttered.

"Agh!" Khufu agreed. He took our hands and led us down to the shore.

26. Aboard the Egyptian Queen

AS FAR AS RIDES TO THE Land of Death go, the boat was pretty cool. It had multiple decks with ornate railings painted black and green. The side paddlewheels churned the river into froth, and along the paddlewheel housings the name of the boat glittered in gold letters: EGYPTIAN QUEEN.

At first glance, you'd think the boat was just a tourist attraction: one of those floating casinos or cruise boats for old people. But if you looked closer you started noticing strange little details. The boat's name was written in Demotic and in hieroglyphics underneath the English. Sparkly smoke billowed from the stacks as if the engines were burning gold. Orbs of multicolored fire flitted around the decks. And on the prow of the ship, two painted eyes moved and blinked, scanning the river for trouble.

"That's odd," Sadie remarked.

I nodded. "I've seen eyes painted on boats before. They still do that all over the Mediterranean. But usually they don't move."

"What? No, not the stupid eyes. That lady on the highest deck. Isn't that…" Sadie broke into a grin. "Bast!"

Sure enough, our favorite feline was leaning out the window of the pilot's house. I was about to wave to her, when I noticed the creature standing next to Bast, gripping the wheel. He had a human body and was dressed in the white uniform of a boat captain. But instead of a head, a double-bladed axe sprouted from his collar. And I'm not talking about a *small* axe for chopping wood. I'm talking *battle*-axe: twin crescent-shaped iron blades, one in front where his face should be, one in the back, the edges splattered with suspicious-looking dried red splotches.

The ship pulled up to the dock. Balls of fire began zipping around—lowering the gangplank, tying off ropes, and basically doing crew-type stuff. How they did it without hands, and without setting everything on fire, I don't know, but it wasn't the strangest thing I'd seen that week.

Bast climbed down from the wheelhouse. She hugged us as we came aboard—even Khufu, who tried to return the favor by grooming her for lice.

"I'm glad you survived!" Bast told us. "What happened?"

We gave her the basics and her hair poofed out again. "Elvis? *Gah!* Thoth is getting cruel in his old age. Well, I can't say I'm glad to be on this boat again. I *hate* the water, but I suppose—"

"You've been on this boat before?" I asked.

Bast's smile wavered. "A million questions as usual, but let's eat first. The captain is waiting."

I wasn't anxious to meet a giant axe, and I wasn't enthusiastic about another one of Bast's grilled-cheese-and-Friskies dinners, but we followed her inside the boat.

The dining parlor was lavishly decorated in Egyptian style. Colorful murals depicting the gods

covered the walls. Gilded columns supported the ceiling. A long dining table was laden with every kind of food you could want—sandwiches, pizzas, hamburgers, Mexican food, you name it. It *way* made up for missing Thoth's barbecue. On a side table stood an ice chest, a line of golden goblets, and a soda dispenser with about twenty different choices. The mahogany chairs were carved to look like baboons, which reminded me a little too much of Graceland's Jungle Room, but Khufu thought they were okay. He barked at his chair just to show it who was top monkey, then sat on its lap. He picked an avocado from a basket of fruit and started peeling it.

Across the room, a door opened, and the axe dude came in. He had to duck to avoid cleaving the doorframe.

"Lord and Lady Kane," the captain said, bowing. His voice was a quivery hum that resonated along his front blade. I saw a video one time of a guy playing music by hitting a saw with a hammer, and that's sort of the way the captain sounded. "It is an honor to have you aboard."

"'Lady Kane,'" Sadie mused. "I like that."

"I am Bloodstained Blade," the captain said. "What are your orders?"

Sadie raised an eyebrow at Bast. "He takes orders from us?"

"Within reason," Bast said. "He is bound to your family. Your father…" She cleared her throat. "Well, he and your mother summoned this boat."

The axe demon made a disapproving hum. "You haven't told them, goddess?"

"I'm getting to it," Bast grumbled.

"Told us what?" I asked.

"Just details." She rushed on. "The boat can be summoned once a year, and only in times of great need. You'll need to give the captain your orders now. He must have clear directions if we're to proceed, ah, *safely.*"

I wondered what was bothering Bast, but the axe dude was waiting for orders, and the flecks of dried blood on his blades told me I'd better not keep him in suspense.

"We need to visit the Hall of Judgment," I told him. "Take us to the Land of the Dead."

Bloodstained Blade hummed thoughtfully. "I will make the arrangements, Lord Kane, but it will take time."

"We don't have a lot of that." I turned to Sadie. "It's…what, the evening of the twenty-seventh?"

She nodded in agreement. "Day after tomorrow, at sunrise, Set completes his pyramid and destroys the world unless we stop him. So, yes, Captain Very Large Blade, or whatever it is, I'd say we're in a bit of a rush."

"We will, of course, do our best," said Bloodstained Blade, though his voice sounded a little, well, sharp. "The crew will prepare your staterooms. Will you dine while you wait?"

I looked at the table laden with food and realized how hungry I was. I hadn't eaten since we were in the Washington Monument. "Yeah. *Um,* thanks, BSB."

The captain bowed again, which made him look a little too much like a guillotine. Then he left us to our dinner.

At first, I was too busy eating to talk. I inhaled a roast beef sandwich, a couple of pieces of cherry pie with ice cream, and three glasses of ginger ale before I finally came up for air.

Sadie didn't eat as much. Then again she'd had lunch on the plane. She settled for a cheese-and-

cucumber sandwich and one of those weird British drinks she likes—a Ribena. Khufu carefully picked out everything that ended with *-o*—Doritos, Oreos, and some chunks of meat. Buffalo? Armadillo? I was scared to even guess.

The balls of fire floated attentively around the room, refilling our goblets and clearing away our plates as we finished.

After so many days spent running for our lives, it felt good to just sit at a dinner table and relax. The captain's informing us that he couldn't transport us instantly to the Land of the Dead was the best news I'd had in a long time.

"Agh!" Khufu wiped his mouth and grabbed one of the balls of fire. He fashioned it into a glowing basketball and snorted at me.

For once I was pretty sure what he'd said in Baboon. It wasn't an invitation. It meant something like: "I'm going to play basketball by myself now. I will not invite you because your lack of skill would make me throw up."

"No problem, man," I said, though my face felt hot with embarrassment. "Have fun."

Khufu snorted again, then loped off with the ball under his arm. I wondered if he'd find a court somewhere on board.

At the far end of the table, Bast pushed her plate away. She'd hardly touched her tuna Friskies.

"Not hungry?" I asked.

"*Hmm?* Oh…I suppose not." She turned her goblet listlessly. She was wearing an expression I didn't associate with cats: guilt.

Sadie and I locked eyes. We had a brief, silent exchange, something like:

You ask her.

No, you.

Of course Sadie's better at giving dirty looks, so I lost the contest.

"Bast?" I said. "What did the captain want you to tell us?"

She hesitated. "Oh, that? You shouldn't listen to demons. Bloodstained Blade is bound by magic to serve, but if he ever got loose, he'd use that axe on all of us, believe me."

"You're changing the subject," I said.

Bast traced her finger across the table, drawing hieroglyphs in the condensation ring from her goblet. "The truth? I haven't been on board since the night your mother died. Your parents had docked this boat on the Thames. After the…accident, your father brought me here. This is where we made our deal."

I realized she meant *right* here, at this table. My father had sat here in despair after Mom's death—with no one to console him except the cat goddess, an axe demon, and a bunch of floating lights.

I studied Bast's face in the dim light. I thought about the painting we'd found at Graceland. Even in human form, Bast looked so much like that cat—a cat drawn by some artist thousands of years ago.

"It wasn't just a chaos monster, was it?" I asked.

Bast eyed me. "What do you mean?"

"The thing you were fighting when our parents released you from the obelisk. It wasn't just a chaos monster. You were fighting Apophis."

All around the parlor, the servant fires dimmed. One dropped a plate and fluttered nervously.

"Don't say the Serpent's name," Bast warned. "Especially as we head into the night. Night is his realm."

"It's true, then." Sadie shook her head in dismay. "Why didn't you say anything? Why did you lie to us?"

Bast dropped her gaze. Sitting in the shadows, she looked weary and frail. Her face was etched with the traces of old battle scars.

"I was the Eye of Ra." She spoke quietly. "The sun god's champion, the instrument of his will. Do you have any idea what an honor it was?"

She extended her claws and studied them. "When people see pictures of Ra's warrior cat, they assume it's Sekhmet, the lioness. And she *was* his first champion, it's true. But she was too violent, too out of control. Eventually Sekhmet was forced to step down, and Ra chose *me* as his fighter: little Bast."

"Why do you sound ashamed?" Sadie asked. "You said it's an honor."

"At first I was proud, Sadie. I fought the Serpent for ages. Cats and snakes are mortal enemies. I did my job well. But then Ra withdrew to the heavens. He bound me to the Serpent with his last spell. He cast us both into that abyss, where I was charged to fight the Serpent and keep it down forever."

A realization crept over me. "So you *weren't* a minor prisoner. You were imprisoned longer than any of the other gods."

She closed her eyes. "I still remember Ra's words: 'My loyal cat. This is your greatest duty.' And I was proud to do it…for centuries. Then millennia. Can you imagine what it was like? Knives against fangs, slashing and thrashing, a never-ending war in the darkness. Our life forces grew weaker, my enemy's and mine, and I began to realize that was Ra's plan. The Serpent and I would rip each other to nothingness, and the world would be safe. Only in this way could Ra withdraw in peace of mind, knowing chaos would not overcome Ma'at. I would have done my duty, too. I had no choice. Until your parents—"

"Gave you an escape route," I said. "And you took it."

Bast looked up miserably. "I am the queen of cats. I have many strengths. But to be honest, Carter…cats are not very brave."

"And Ap—your enemy?"

"He stayed trapped in the abyss. Your father and I were sure of it. The Serpent was already greatly weakened from eons of fighting with me, and when your mother used her own life force to close the abyss, well…she worked a powerful feat of magic. There should've been no way for the Serpent to break through that kind of seal. But as the years have gone by…we became less and less sure the prison would hold him. If somehow he managed to escape and regain his strength, I cannot imagine what would happen. And it would be my fault."

I tried to imagine the serpent, Apophis—a creature of chaos even worse than Set. I pictured Bast with her knives, locked in combat with that monster for eons. Maybe I should've been angry at Bast for not telling us the truth earlier. Instead, I felt sorry for her. She'd been put in the same position we were now in—forced to do a job that was way too big for her.

"So why did my parents release you?" I asked. "Did they say?"

She nodded slowly. “I was losing my fight. Your father told me that your mother had foreseen… horrible things if the Serpent overcame me. They had to free me, give me time to heal. They said it was the first step in restoring the gods. I don’t pretend to understand their whole plan. I was relieved to take your father’s offer. I convinced myself I was doing the right thing for the gods. But it does not change the fact that I was a coward. I failed in my duty.”

“It isn’t your fault,” I told her. “It wasn’t fair of Ra to ask of you.”

“Carter’s right,” Sadie said. “That’s too much sacrifice for one person—one cat goddess, whatever.”

“It was my king’s will,” Bast said. “The pharaoh can command his subjects for the good of the kingdom—even to lay down their lives—and they must obey. Horus knows this. He was the pharaoh many times.”

She speaks truly, Horus said.

“Then you had a stupid king,” I said.

The boat shuddered as if we’d ground the keel over a sandbar.

“Be careful, Carter,” Bast warned. “Ma’at, the order of creation, hinges on loyalty to the rightful king. If you question it, you’ll fall under the influence of chaos.”

I felt so frustrated, I wanted to break something. I wanted to yell that order didn’t seem much better than chaos if you had to get yourself killed for it.

You are being childish, Horus scolded. *You are a servant of Ma’at. These thoughts are unworthy.*

My eyes stung. “Then maybe *I’m* unworthy.”

“Carter?” Sadie asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m going to bed.”

I stormed off. One of the flickering lights joined me, guiding me upstairs to my quarters. The stateroom was probably very nice. I didn’t pay attention. I just fell on the bed and passed out.

I seriously needed an extra-strength magic pillow, because my *ba* refused to stay put. [And no, Sadie, I don’t think wrapping my head in duct tape would’ve worked either.]

My spirit floated up to the steamboat’s wheelhouse, but it wasn’t Bloodstained Blade at the wheel. Instead, a young man in leather armor navigated the boat. His eyes were outlined with kohl, and his head was bald except for a braided ponytail. The guy definitely worked out, because his arms were ripped. A sword like mine was strapped to his belt.

“The river is treacherous,” he told me in a familiar voice. “A pilot cannot get distracted. He must always be alert for sandbars and hidden snags. That’s why boats are painted with my eyes, you know—to see the dangers.”

“The Eyes of Horus,” I said. “You.”

The falcon god glanced at me, and I saw that his eyes were two different colors—one blazing yellow like the sun, the other reflective silver like the moon. The effect was so disorienting, I had to look away. And when I did, I noticed that Horus’s shadow didn’t match his form. Stretched across the wheelhouse was the silhouette of a giant falcon.

“You wonder if order is better than chaos,” he said. “You become distracted from our real

enemy: Set. You should be taught a lesson."

I was about to say, *No really, that's okay.*

But immediately my *ba* was whisked away. Suddenly, I was on board an airplane—a big international aircraft like planes my dad and I had taken a million times. Zia Rashid, Desjardins, and two other magicians were scrunched up in a middle row, surrounded by families with screaming children. Zia didn't seem to mind. She meditated calmly with her eyes closed, while Desjardins and the other two men looked so uncomfortable, I almost wanted to laugh.

The plane rocked back and forth. Desjardins spilled wine all over his lap. The seat belt light blinked on, and a voice crackled over the intercom: "This is the captain. It looks like we'll be experiencing some minor turbulence as we make our descent into Dallas, so I'm going to ask the flight attendants—"

Boom! A blast rattled the windows—lightning followed immediately by thunder.

Zia's eyes snapped open. "The Red Lord."

The passengers screamed as the plane plummeted several hundred feet.

"Il commence!" Desjardins shouted over the noise. "Quickly!"

As the plane shook, passengers shrieked and grabbed their seats. Desjardins got up and opened the overhead compartment.

"Sir!" a flight attendant yelled. "Sir, sit down!"

Desjardins ignored the attendant. He grabbed four familiar bags—magical tool kits—and threw them to his colleagues.

Then things really went wrong. A horrible shudder passed through the cabin and the plane lurched sideways. Outside the right-hand windows, I saw the plane's wing get sheared off by a five-hundred-mile-an-hour wind.

The cabin devolved into chaos—drinks, books, and shoes flying everywhere, oxygen masks dropping and tangling, people screaming for their lives.

"Protect the innocents!" Desjardins ordered.

The plane began to shake and cracks appeared in the windows and walls. The passengers went silent, slumping into unconsciousness as the air pressure dropped. The four magicians raised their wands as the airplane broke to pieces.

For a moment, the magicians floated in a maelstrom of storm clouds, chunks of fuselage, luggage, and spinning passengers still strapped to their seats. Then a white glow expanded around them, a bubble of power that slowed the breakup of the plane and kept the pieces swirling in a tight orbit. Desjardins reached out his hand and the edge of a cloud stretched toward him—a tendril of cottony white mist, like a safety line. The other magicians did likewise, and the storm bent to their will. White vapor wrapped around them and began to send out more tendrils, like funnel clouds, which snatched pieces of the plane and pulled them back together.

A child fell past Zia, but she pointed her staff and murmured a spell. A cloud enveloped the little girl and brought her back. Soon the four magicians were reassembling the plane around them, sealing the breaches with cloudy cobwebs until the entire cabin was encased in a glowing cocoon of vapor. Outside, the storm raged and thunder boomed, but the passengers slept soundly in their seats.

"Zia!" Desjardins shouted. "We can't hold this for long."

Zia ran past him up the aisle to the flight deck. Somehow the front of the plane had survived the breakup intact. The door was armored and locked, but Zia's staff flared, and the door melted like wax. She stepped through and found three unconscious pilots. The view through the window was enough to make me sick. Through the spiraling clouds, the ground was coming up fast—*very* fast.

Zia slammed her wand against the controls. Red energy surged through the displays. Dials spun, meters blinked, and the altimeter leveled out. The plane's nose came up, its speed dropping. As I watched, Zia glided the plane toward a cow pasture and landed it without even a bump. Then her eyes rolled back in her head, and she collapsed.

Desjardins found her and gathered her in his arms. "Quickly," he told his colleagues, "the mortals will wake soon."

They dragged Zia out of the cockpit, and my *ba* was swept away through a blur of images.

I saw Phoenix again—or at least *some* of the city. A massive red sandstorm churned across the valley, swallowing buildings and mountains. In the harsh, hot wind, I heard Set laughing, reveling in his power.

Then I saw Brooklyn: Amos's ruined house on the East River and a winter storm raging overhead, howling winds slamming the city with sleet and hail.

And then I saw a place I didn't recognize: a river winding through a desert canyon. The sky was a blanket of pitch-black clouds, and the river's surface seemed to boil. Something was moving under the water, something huge, evil, and powerful—and I knew it was waiting for me.

This is only the beginning, Horus warned me. *Set will destroy everyone you care about. Believe me, I know.*

The river became a marsh of tall reeds. The sun blazed overhead. Snakes and crocodiles slid through the water. At the water's edge sat a thatched hut. Outside it, a woman and a child of about ten stood examining a battered sarcophagus. I could tell the coffin had once been a work of art—gold encrusted with gems—but now it was dented and black with grime.

The woman ran her hands over the coffin's lid.

"Finally." She had my mother's face—blue eyes and caramel-colored hair—but she glowed with magical radiance, and I knew I was looking at the goddess Isis.

She turned to the boy. "We have searched so long, my son. Finally we have retrieved him. I will use my magic and give him life again!"

"Papa?" The boy gazed wide-eyed at the box. "He's really inside?"

"Yes, Horus. And now—"

Suddenly their hut erupted into flames. The god Set stepped from the inferno—a mighty red-skinned warrior with smoldering black eyes. He wore the double crown of Egypt and the robes of a pharaoh. In his hands, an iron staff smoldered.

"Found the coffin, did you?" he said. "Good for you!"

Isis reached toward the sky. She summoned lightning against the god of chaos, but Set's rod absorbed the attack and reflected it back at her. Arcs of electricity blasted the goddess and sent her sprawling.

"Mother!" The boy drew a knife and charged Set. "I'll kill you!"

Set bellowed with laughter. He easily sidestepped the boy and kicked him into the dirt.

"You have spirit, nephew," Set admitted. "But you won't live long enough to challenge me. As for your father, I'll just have to dispose of him more permanently."

Set slammed his iron staff against the coffin's lid.

Isis screamed as the coffin shattered like ice.

"Make a wish." Set blew with all his might, and the shards of coffin flew into the sky, scattering in all directions. "Poor Osiris—he's gone to pieces, scattered all over Egypt now. And as for you, sister Isis—run! That's what you do best!"

Set lunged forward. Isis grabbed her son's hand and they both turned into birds, flying for their lives.

The scene faded, and I was back in the steamboat's wheelhouse. The sun rose in fast-forward as towns and barges sped past and the banks of the Mississippi blurred into a play of light and shadow.

"He destroyed my father," Horus told me. "He will do the same to yours."

"No," I said.

Horus fixed me with those strange eyes—one blazing gold, one full-moon silver. "My mother and Aunt Nephthys spent years searching for the pieces of the coffin and Father's body. When they collected all fourteen, my cousin Anubis helped bind my father back together with mummy wrappings, but still Mother's magic could not bring him back to life fully. Osiris became an undead god, a half-living shadow of my father, fit to rule only in the Duat. But his loss gave me anger. Anger gave me the strength to defeat Set and take the throne for myself. You must do the same."

"I don't want a throne," I said. "I want my dad."

"Don't deceive yourself. Set is merely toying with you. He will bring you to despair, and your sorrow will make you weak."

"I have to save my dad!"

"That is not your mission," Horus chided. "The world is at stake. Now, wake!"

Sadie was shaking my arm. She and Bast stood over me, looking concerned.

"What?" I asked.

"We're here," Sadie said nervously. She'd changed into a fresh linen outfit, black this time, which matched her combat boots. She'd even managed to redye her hair so the streaks were blue.

I sat up and realized I felt rested for the first time in a week. My soul may have been traveling, but at least my body had gotten some sleep. I glanced out the stateroom window. It was pitch-black outside.

"How long was I out?" I demanded.

"We've sailed down most of the Mississippi and into the Duat," Bast said. "Now we approach the First Cataract."

"The First Cataract?" I asked.

"The entrance," Bast said grimly, "to the Land of the Dead."

SADIE

27. A Demon with Free Samples

ME? I SLEPT LIKE THE DEAD, which I hoped wasn't a sign of things to come.

I could tell Carter's soul had been wandering through some frightening places, but he wouldn't talk about them.

"Did you see Zia?" I asked. He looked so rattled I thought his face would fall off. "Knew it," I said.

We followed Bast up to the wheelhouse, where Bloodstained Blade was studying a map while Khufu manned—*er,* babooned—the wheel.

"The baboon is driving," I noted. "Should I be worried?"

"Quiet, please, Lady Kane." Bloodstained Blade ran his fingers over a long stretch of papyrus map. "This is delicate work. Two degrees to starboard, Khufu."

"Agh!" Khufu said.

The sky was already dark, but as we chugged along, the stars disappeared. The river turned the color of blood. Darkness swallowed the horizon, and along the riverbanks, the lights of towns changed to flickering fires, then winked out completely.

Now our only lights were the multicolored servant fires and the glittering smoke that bloomed from the smokestacks, washing us all in a weird metallic glow.

"Should be just ahead," the captain announced. In the dim light, his red-flecked axe blade looked scarier than ever.

"What's that map?" I asked.

"Spells of Coming Forth by Day," he said. "Don't worry. It's a good copy."

I looked at Carter for a translation.

"Most people call it *The Book of the Dead,*" he told me. "Rich Egyptians were always buried with a copy, so they could have directions through the Duat to the Land of the Dead. It's like an *Idiot's Guide to the Afterlife."*

The captain hummed indignantly. "I am no idiot, Lord Kane."

"No, no, I just meant…" Carter's voice faltered. "*Uh,* what is *that?"*

Ahead of us, crags of rock jutted from the river like fangs, turning the water into a boiling mass of rapids.

"The First Cataract," Bloodstained Blade announced. "Hold on."

Khufu pushed the wheel to the left, and the steamboat skidded sideways, shooting between two rocky spires with only centimeters to spare. I'm not much of a screamer, but I'll readily admit that I

screamed my head off. [And don't look at me like that, Carter. You weren't much better.]

We dropped over a stretch of white water—or red water—and swerved to avoid a rock the size of Paddington Station. The steamboat made two more suicidal turns between boulders, did a three-sixty spin round a swirling vortex, launched over a ten-meter waterfall, and came crashing down so hard, my ears popped like a gunshot.

We continued downstream as if nothing had happened, the roar of the rapids fading behind us.

"I don't like cataracts," I decided. "Are there more?"

"Not as large, thankfully," said Bast, who was also looking seasick. "We've crossed over into __"

"The Land of the Dead," Carter finished.

He pointed to the shore, which was shrouded in mist. Strange things lurked in the darkness: flickering ghost lights, giant faces made of fog, hulking shadows that seemed unconnected to anything physical. Along the riverbanks, old bones dragged themselves through the mud, linking with other bones in random patterns.

"I'm guessing this isn't the Mississippi," I said.

"The River of Night," Bloodstained Blade hummed. "It is every river and no river—the shadow of the Mississippi, the Nile, the Thames. It flows throughout the Duat, with many branches and tributaries."

"Clears that right up," I muttered.

The scenes got stranger. We saw ghost villages from ancient times—little clusters of reed huts made of flickering smoke. We saw vast temples crumbling and reconstructing themselves over and over again like a looped video. And everywhere, ghosts turned their faces towards our boat as we passed. Smoky hands reached out. Shades silently called to us, then turned away in despair as we passed.

"The lost and confused," Bast said. "Spirits who never found their way to the Hall of Judgment."

"Why are they so sad?" I asked.

"Well, they're dead," Carter speculated.

"No, it's more than that," I said. "It's like they're…expecting someone."

"Ra," Bast said. "For eons, Ra's glorious sun boat would travel this route each night, fighting off the forces of Apophis." She looked round nervously as if remembering old ambushes. "It was dangerous: every night, a fight for existence. But as he passed, Ra would bring sunlight and warmth to the Duat, and these lost spirits would rejoice, remembering the world of the living."

"But that's a legend," Carter said. "The earth revolves around the sun. The sun never actually descends under the earth."

"Have you learned nothing of Egypt?" Bast asked. "Conflicting stories can be equally true. The sun is a ball of fire in space, yes. But its image you see as it crosses the sky, the life-giving warmth and light it brings to the earth—that was embodied by Ra. The sun was his throne, his source of power, his very spirit. But now Ra has retreated into the heavens. He sleeps, and the sun is just the sun. Ra's boat no longer travels on its cycle through the Duat. He no longer lights the dark, and the dead feel his absence most keenly."

"Indeed," Bloodstained Blade said, though he didn't sound very upset about it. "Legend says the

world will end when Ra gets too tired to continue living in his weakened state. Apophis will swallow the sun. Darkness will reign. Chaos will overcome Ma'at, and the Serpent will reign forever."

Part of me thought this was absurd. The planets would not simply stop spinning. The sun would not cease to rise.

On the other hand, here I was riding a boat through the Land of the Dead with a demon and a god. If Apophis was real too, I didn't fancy meeting him.

And to be honest, I felt guilty. If the story Thoth told me was true, Isis had *caused* Ra to retreat into the heavens with that secret name business. Which meant, in a ridiculous, maddening way, the end of the world would be my fault. Bloody typical. I wanted to punch myself to get even with Isis, but I suspected it would hurt.

"Ra should wake up and smell the *sahlab,"* I said. "He should come back."

Bast laughed without humor. "And the world should be young again, Sadie. I wish it could be so…."

Khufu grunted and gestured ahead. He gave the captain back the wheel and ran out of the wheelhouse and down the stairs.

"The baboon is right," said Bloodstained Blade. "You should get to the prow. A challenge will be coming soon."

"What sort of challenge?" I asked.

"It's hard to tell," Bloodstained Blade said, and I thought I detected smug satisfaction in his voice. "I wish you luck, Lady Kane."

"Why me?" I grumbled.

Bast, Carter, and I stood at the prow of the boat, watching the river appear out of the darkness. Below us, the boat's painted eyes glowed faintly in the dark, sweeping beams of light across the red water. Khufu had climbed to the top of the gangplank, which stood straight up when retracted, and cupped his hand over his eyes like a sailor in a crow's-nest.

But all that vigilance didn't do much good. With the dark and the mist, our visibility was nil. Massive rocks, broken pillars, and crumbling statues of pharaohs loomed out of nowhere, and Bloodstained Blade yanked the wheel to avoid them, forcing us to grab hold of the rails. Occasionally we'd see long slimy lines cutting through the surface of the water, like tentacles, or the backs of submerged creatures—I really didn't want to know.

"Mortal souls are always challenged," Bast told me. "You must prove your worth to enter the Land of the Dead."

"Like it's such a big treat?"

I'm not sure how long I stared into the darkness, but after a good while a reddish smudge appeared in the distance, as if the sky were becoming lighter.

"Is that my imagination, or—"

"Our destination," Bast said. "Strange, we really should've been challenged by now—"

The boat shuddered, and the water began to boil. A giant figure erupted from the river. I could see him only from the waist up, but he towered several meters over the boat. His body was humanoid

—bare-chested and hairy with purplish skin. A rope belt was tied around his waist, festooned with leather pouches, severed demon heads, and other charming bits and bobs. His head was a strange combination of lion and human, with gold eyes and a black mane done in dreadlocks. His blood-splattered mouth was feline, with bristly whiskers and razor-sharp fangs. He roared, scaring Khufu right off the gangplank. The poor baboon did a flying leap into Carter's arms, which knocked them both to the deck.

"You *had* to say something," I told Bast weakly. "This a relative of yours, I hope?"

Bast shook her head. "I cannot help you with this, Sadie. *You* are the mortals. You must deal with the challenge."

"Oh, thanks for that."

"I am Shezmu!" the bloody lion man said.

I wanted to say, "Yes, you certainly are." But I decided to keep my mouth shut.

He turned his golden eyes on Carter and tilted his head. His nostrils quivered. "I smell the blood of pharaohs. A tasty treat…or do you dare to name me?"

"N-name you?" Carter sputtered. "Do you mean your secret name?"

The demon laughed. He grabbed a nearby spire of rock, which crumpled like old plaster in his fist.

I looked desperately at Carter. "You don't happen to have his secret name lying around somewhere?"

"It may be in *The Book of the Dead,*" Carter said. "I forgot to check."

"Well?" I said.

"Keep him busy," Carter replied, and scrambled off to the wheelhouse.

Keep a demon busy, I thought. *Right. Maybe he fancies a game of tiddlywinks.*

"Do you give up?" Shezmu bellowed.

"No!" I yelled. "No, we don't give up. We will name you. Just… Gosh, you're quite well muscled, aren't you? Do you work out?"

I glanced at Bast, who nodded approval.

Shezmu rumbled with pride and flexed his mighty arms. Never fails with men, does it? Even if they're twenty meters tall and lion-headed.

"I am Shezmu!" he bellowed.

"Yes, you might've mentioned that already," I said. "I'm wondering, *um,* what sort of titles you've earned over the years, eh? Lord of this and that?"

"I am Osiris's royal executioner!" he yelled, smashing a fist into the water and rocking our boat. "I am the Lord of Blood and Wine!"

"Brilliant," I said, trying not to get sick. "Er, how are blood and wine connected, exactly?"

"Garrr!" He leaned forward and bared his fangs, which were not any prettier up close. His mane was matted with nasty bits of dead fish and river moss. "Lord Osiris lets me behead the wicked! I crush them in my wine press, and make wine for the dead!"

I made a mental note never to drink the wine of the dead.

You're doing well. Isis's voice gave me a start. She'd been quiet so long, I'd almost forgotten

her. *Ask him about his other duties.*

"And what are your other duties…O powerful wine demon guy?"

"I am Lord of…" He flexed his muscles for maximum effect. "Perfume!"

He grinned at me, apparently waiting for terror to set it.

"Oh, my!" I said. "That must make your enemies tremble."

"Ha, ha, ha! Yes! Would you like to try a free sample?" He ripped a slimy leather pouch off his belt, and brought out a clay pot filled with sweet-smelling yellow powder. "I call this… Eternity!"

"Lovely," I gagged. I glanced behind me, wondering where Carter had gone to, but there was no sign of him.

Keep him talking, Isis urged.

"And, *um*…perfume is part of your job because…wait, I've got it, you squeeze it out of plants, like you squeeze wine…"

"Or blood!" Shezmu added.

"Well, naturally," I said. "The blood goes without saying."

"Blood!" he said.

Khufu yelped and covered his eyes.

"So you serve Osiris?" I asked the demon.

"Yes! At least…" He hesitated, snarling in doubt. "I did. Osiris's throne is empty. But he will return. He will!"

"Of course," I said. "And so your friends call you what…Shezzy? Bloodsiekins?"

"I have no friends! But if I did, they would call me Slaughterer of Souls, Fierce of Face! But I don't have any friends, so my name is not in danger. Ha, ha, ha!"

I looked at Bast, wondering if I'd just gotten as lucky as I thought. Bast beamed at me.

Carter came stumbling down the stairs, holding *The Book of the Dead.* "I've got it! Somewhere here. Can't read this part, but—"

"Name me or be eaten!" Shezmu bellowed.

"I name you!" I shouted back. "Shezmu, Slaughterer of Souls, Fierce of Face!"

"GAAAAHHHHH!" He writhed in pain. "How do they always know?"

"Let us pass!" I commanded. "Oh, and one more thing…my brother wants a free sample."

I just had time to step away, and Carter just had time to look confused before the demon blew yellow dust all over him. Then Shezmu sank under the waves.

"What a nice fellow," I said.

"Pah!" Carter spit perfume. He looked like a piece of breaded fish. "What was *that* for?"

"You smell lovely," I assured him. "What's next, then?"

I was feeling very pleased with myself until our boat rounded a bend in the river. Suddenly the reddish glow on the horizon became a blaze of light. Up in the wheelhouse, the captain rang the alarm bell.

Ahead of us, the river was on fire, rushing through a steaming stretch of rapids towards what looked like a bubbling volcanic crater.

“The Lake of Fire,” Bast said. “This is where it gets interesting.”

SADIE

28. I Have a Date with the God of Toilet Paper

BAST HAD AN INTERESTING DEFINITION of *interesting*: a boiling lake several miles wide that smelled like burning petrol and rotten meat. Our steamboat stopped short where the river met the lake, because a giant metal gate blocked our path. It was a bronze disk like a shield, easily as wide as our boat, half submerged in the river. I wasn't sure how it avoided melting in the heat, but it made going forward impossible. On either bank of the river, facing the disk, was a giant bronze baboon with its arms raised.

"What is this?" I asked.

"The Gates of the West," Bast said. "Ra's sunboat would pass through and be renewed in the fires of the lake, then pass through to the other side and rise through the Gates of the East for a new day."

Looking up at the huge baboons, I wondered if Khufu had some sort of secret baboon code that would get us in. But instead he barked at the statues and cowered heroically behind my legs.

"How do we get past?" I wondered.

"Perhaps," a new voice said, "you should ask me."

The air shimmered. Carter backed up quickly, and Bast hissed.

In front of me appeared a glowing bird spirit: a *ba*. It had the usual combination of human head and killer turkey body, with its wings tucked back and its entire form glowing, but something about this *ba* was different. I realized I knew the spirit's face—an old bald man with brown, papery skin, milky eyes, and a kindly smile.

"Iskandar?" I managed.

"Hello, my dear." The old magician's voice echoed as if from the bottom of a well.

"But…" I found myself tearing up. "You're really dead, then?"

He chuckled. "Last I checked."

"But *why?* I didn't make you—"

"No, my dear. It wasn't your fault. It was simply the right time."

"It was horrible timing!" My surprise and sadness abruptly turned to anger. "You *left* us before we got trained or anything, and now Desjardins is after us and—"

"My dear, look how far you've come. Look how well you have done. You didn't need me, nor would more training have helped. My brethren would have found out the truth about you soon enough. They are excellent at sniffing out godlings, I fear, and they would not have understood."

"You knew, didn't you? You knew we were possessed by gods."

"Hosts of the gods."

"Whatever! You knew."

"After our second meeting, yes. My only regret is that I did not realize it sooner. I could not protect you and your brother as much as—"

"As much as who?"

Iskandar's eyes became sad and distant. "I made choices, Sadie. Some seemed wise at the time. Some, in retrospect…"

"Your decision to forbid the gods. My mum convinced you it was a bad idea, didn't she?"

His spectral wings fluttered. "You must understand, Sadie. When Egypt fell to the Romans, my spirit was crushed. Thousands of years of Egyptian power and tradition toppled by that foolish Queen Cleopatra, who thought she could host a goddess. The blood of the pharaohs seemed weak and diluted—lost forever. At the time I blamed everyone—the gods who used men to act out their petty quarrels, the Ptolemaic rulers who had driven Egypt into the ground, my own brethren in the House for becoming weak and greedy and corrupt. I communed with Thoth, and we agreed: the gods must be put away, banished. The magicians must find their way without them. The new rules kept the House of Life intact for another two thousand years. At the time, it was the right choice."

"And now?" I asked.

Iskandar's glow dimmed. "Your mother foresaw a great imbalance. She foresaw the day—very soon—when Ma'at would be destroyed, and chaos would reclaim all of Creation. She insisted that only the gods and the House together could prevail. The old way—the path of the gods—would have to be reestablished. I was a foolish old man. I knew in my heart she was right, but I refused to believe…and your parents took it upon themselves to act. They sacrificed themselves trying to put things right, because I was too stubborn to change. For that, I am truly sorry."

As much as I tried, I found it hard to stay angry at the old turkey. It's a rare thing when an adult admits they are wrong to a child—especially a wise, two-thousand-year-old adult. You rather have to cherish those moments.

"I forgive you, Iskandar," I said. "Honestly. But Set is about to destroy North America with a giant red pyramid. What do I *do* about it?"

"That, my dear, I can't answer. Your choice…" He tilted his head back toward the lake, as if hearing a voice. "Our time is at an end. I must do my job as gatekeeper, and decide whether or not to grant you access to the Lake of Fire."

"But I've got more questions!"

"And I wish we had more time," Iskandar said. "You have a strong spirit, Sadie Kane. Someday, you will make an excellent guardian *ba.* "

"Thanks," I muttered. "Can't wait to be poultry forever."

"I can only tell you this: your choice approaches. Don't let your feelings blind you to what is best, as I did."

"What choice? Best for whom?"

"That's the key, isn't it? Your father—your family—the gods—the world. Ma'at and Isfet, order and chaos, are about to collide more violently than they have in eons. You and your brother will be instrumental in balancing those forces, or destroying everything. That, also, your mother foresaw."

"Hang on. What do you—"

"Until we meet again, Sadie. Perhaps some day, we will have a chance to talk further. But for now, pass through! My job is to assess your courage—and you have that in abundance."

I wanted to argue that no, in fact, I didn't. I wanted Iskandar to stay and tell me exactly what my mother had foreseen in my future. But his spirit faded, leaving the deck quiet and still. Only then did I realize that no one else on board had said a thing.

I turned to face Carter. "Leave everything to me, eh?"

He was staring into space, not even blinking. Khufu still clung to my legs, absolutely petrified. Bast's face was frozen in mid-hiss.

"Um, guys?" I snapped my fingers, and they all unfroze.

"Ba!" Bast hissed. Then she looked around and scowled. "Wait, I thought I saw…what just happened?"

I wondered how powerful a magician had to be to stop time, to freeze even a goddess. Some day, Iskandar was going to teach me that trick, dead or no.

"Yeah," I said. "I reckon there was a *ba.* Gone now."

The baboon statues began to rumble and grind as their arms lowered. The bronze sun disk in the middle of the river sank below the surface, clearing the way into the lake. The boat shot forward, straight into the flames and the boiling red waves. Through the shimmering heat, I could just make out an island in the middle of the lake. On it rose a glittering black temple that looked not at all friendly.

"The Hall of Judgment," I guessed.

Bast nodded. "Times like this, I'm glad I don't have a mortal soul."

As we docked at the island, Bloodstained Blade came down to say good-bye.

"I hope to see you again, Lord and Lady Kane," he hummed. "Your rooms will be waiting aboard the *Egyptian Queen.* Unless, of course, you see fit to release me from service."

Behind his back, Bast shook her head adamantly.

"Um, we'll keep you around," I told the captain. "Thanks for everything."

"As you wish," the captain said. If axes could frown, I'm sure he would have.

"Stay sharp," Carter told him, and with Bast and Khufu, we walked down the gangplank. Instead of pulling away, the ship simply sank into the boiling lava and disappeared.

I scowled at Carter. "'Stay sharp?'"

"I thought it was funny."

"You're hopeless."

We walked up the steps of the black temple. A forest of stone pillars held up the ceiling. Every surface was carved with hieroglyphs and images, but there was no color—just black on black. Haze from the lake drifted through the temple, and despite reed torches that burned on each pillar, it was impossible to see very far through the gloom.

"Stay alert," Bast warned, sniffing the air. "He's close."

"Who?" I asked.

"The Dog," Bast said with disdain.

There was a snarling noise, and a huge black shape leaped out of the mist. It tackled Bast, who rolled over and wailed in feline outrage, then raced off, leaving us alone with the beast. I suppose she had warned us that she wasn't brave.

The new animal was sleek and black, like the Set animal we'd seen in Washington, D.C., but more obviously canine, graceful and rather cute, actually. A jackal, I realized, with a golden collar around its neck.

Then it morphed into a young man, and my heart almost stopped. He was the boy from my dreams, quite literally—the guy in black I'd seen twice before in my *ba* visions.

In person, if possible, Anubis was even more drop-dead gorgeous. [Oh…ha, ha. I didn't catch the pun, but thank you, Carter. God of the dead, drop-dead gorgeous. Yes, hilarious. Now, may I continue?]

He had a pale complexion, tousled black hair, and rich brown eyes like melted chocolate. He was dressed in black jeans, combat boots (like mine!), a ripped T-shirt, and a black leather jacket that suited him quite nicely. He was long and lean like a jackal. His ears, like a jackal's, stuck out a bit (which I found cute), and he wore a gold chain around his neck.

Now, please understand, I am *not* boy crazy. I'm not! I'd spent most of the school term making fun of Liz and Emma, who were, and I was very glad they weren't with me just then, because they would've teased me to no end.

The boy in black stood and brushed off his jacket. "I'm *not* a dog," he grumbled.

"No," I agreed. "You're…"

No doubt I would've said *delicious* or something equally embarrassing, but Carter saved me.

"You're Anubis?" he asked. "We've come for the feather of truth."

Anubis frowned. He locked his very nice eyes with mine. "You're not dead."

"No," I said. "Though we're trying awfully hard."

"I don't deal with the living," he said firmly. Then he looked at Khufu and Carter. "However, you travel with a baboon. That shows good taste. I won't kill you until you've had a chance to explain. Why did Bast bring you here?"

"Actually," Carter said, "Thoth sent us."

Carter started to tell him the story, but Khufu broke in impatiently. *"Agh! Agh!"*

Baboon-speak must have been quite efficient, because Anubis nodded as if he'd just gotten the whole tale. "I see."

He scowled at Carter. "So you're Horus. And you're…" His finger drifted towards me.

"I'm—I'm, *um*—" I stammered. Quite unlike me to be tongue-tied, I'll admit, but looking at Anubis, I felt as if I'd just gotten a large shot of Novocain from the dentist. Carter looked at me as if I'd gone daft.

"I'm not Isis," I managed. "I mean, Isis is milling about inside, but I'm not her. She's just… visiting."

Anubis tilted his head. "And the two of you intend to challenge Set?"

"That's the general idea," Carter agreed. "Will you help?"

Anubis glowered. I remembered Thoth saying Anubis was only in a good mood once an eon or

so. I had the feeling this was not one of those days.

"No," he said flatly. "I'll show you why."

He turned into a jackal and sped back the way he'd come. Carter and I exchanged looks. Not knowing what else to do, we ran after Anubis, deeper into the gloom.

In the center of the temple was a large circular chamber that seemed to be two places at once. On the one hand, it was a great hall with blazing braziers and an empty throne at the far end. The center of the room was dominated by a set of scales—a black iron T with ropes linked to two golden dishes, each big enough to hold a person—but the scales were broken. One of the golden dishes was bent into a V, as if something very heavy had jumped up and down on it. The other dish was hanging by a single rope.

Curled at the base of the scales, fast asleep, was the oddest monster I'd seen yet. It had the head of crocodile with a lion's mane. The front half of its body was lion, but the back end was sleek, brown, and fat—a hippo, I decided. The odd bit was, the animal was tiny—I mean, no larger than an average poodle, which I suppose made him a hippodoodle.

So that was the hall, at least *one* layer of it. But at the same time, I seemed to be standing in a ghostly graveyard—like a three-dimensional projection superimposed on the room. In some places, the marble floor gave way to patches of mud and moss-covered paving stones. Lines of aboveground tombs like miniature row houses radiated from the center of the chamber in a wheel-spokes pattern. Many of the tombs had cracked open. Some were bricked up, others ringed with iron fences. Around the edges of the chamber, the black pillars shifted form, sometimes changing into ancient cypress trees. I felt as if I were stepping between two different worlds, and I couldn't tell which one was real.

Khufu loped straight over to the broken scales and climbed to the top, making himself right at home. He paid no attention to the hippodoodle.

The jackal trotted to the steps of the throne and changed back into Anubis.

"Welcome," he said, "to the last room you will ever see."

Carter looked around in awe. "The Hall of Judgment." He focused on the hippodoodle and frowned. "Is that…"

"Ammit the Devourer," Anubis said. "Look upon him and tremble."

Ammit apparently heard his name in his sleep. He made a yipping sound and turned on his back. His lion and hippo legs twitched. I wondered if netherworld monsters dreamed of chasing rabbits.

"I always pictured him…bigger," Carter admitted.

Anubis gave Carter a harsh look. "Ammit only has to be big enough to eat the hearts of the wicked. Trust me, he does his job well. Or…he *did* it well, anyway."

Up on the scales, Khufu grunted. He almost lost his balance on the central beam, and the dented saucer clanged against the floor.

"Why are the scales broken?" I asked.

Anubis frowned. "Ma'at is weakening. I've tried to fix them, but…" He spread his hands helplessly.

I pointed to the ghostly rows of tombs. "Is that why the, ah, graveyard is butting in?"

Carter looked at me strangely. "What graveyard?"

"The tombs," I said. "The trees."

"What are you talking about?"

"He can't see them," Anubis said. "But you, Sadie—you're perceptive. What do you hear?"

At first I didn't know what he meant. All I heard was the blood rushing through my ears, and the distant rumble and crackle of the Lake of Fire. (And Khufu scratching himself and grunting, but that was nothing new.)

Then I closed my eyes, and I heard another distant sound—music that triggered my earliest memories, my father smiling as he danced me round our house in Los Angeles.

"Jazz," I said.

I opened my eyes, and the Hall of Judgment was gone. Or not *gone,* but faded. I could still see the broken scales and the empty throne. But no black columns, no roar of fire. Even Carter, Khufu, and Ammit had disappeared.

The cemetery was *very* real. Cracked paving stones wobbled under my feet. The humid night air smelled of spices and fish stew and old mildewed places. I might've been back in England—a churchyard in some corner of London, perhaps—but the writing on the graves was in French, and the air was much too mild for an English winter. The trees hung low and lush, covered with Spanish moss.

And there was music. Just outside the cemetery's fence, a jazz band paraded down the street in somber black suits and brightly colored party hats. Saxophonists bobbed up and down. Cornets and clarinets wailed. Drummers grinned and swayed, their sticks flashing. And behind them, carrying flowers and torches, a crowd of revelers in funeral clothes danced round an old-fashioned black hearse as it drove along.

"Where *are* we?" I said, marveling.

Anubis jumped from the top of a tomb and landed next to me. He breathed in the graveyard air, and his features relaxed. I found myself studying his mouth, the curve of his lower lip.

"New Orleans," he said.

"Sorry?"

"The Drowned City," he said. "In the French Quarter, on the west side of the river—the shore of the dead. I love it here. That's why the Hall of Judgment often connects to this part of the mortal world."

The jazz procession made its way down the street, drawing more onlookers into the party.

"What are they celebrating?"

"A funeral," Anubis said. "They've just put the deceased in his tomb. Now they're 'cutting the body loose.' The mourners celebrate the dead one's life with song and dance as they escort the empty hearse away from the cemetery. Very Egyptian, this ritual."

"How do you know so much?"

"I'm the god of funerals. I know every death custom in the world—how to die properly, how to prepare the body and soul for the afterlife. I live for death."

"You must be fun at parties," I said. "Why have you brought me here?"

"To talk." He spread his hands, and the nearest tomb rumbled. A long white ribbon shot out of a crack in the wall. The ribbon just kept coming, weaving itself into some kind of shape next to Anubis, and my first thought was, *My god, he's got a magic roll of toilet paper.*

Then I realized it was cloth, a length of white linen wrappings—*mummy* wrappings. The cloth twisted itself into the form of a bench, and Anubis sat down.

"I don't like Horus." He gestured for me to join him. "He's loud and arrogant and thinks he's better than me. But Isis always treated me like a son."

I crossed my arms. "You're *not* my son. And I told you I'm *not* Isis."

Anubis tilted his head. "No. You don't act like a godling. You remind me of your mother."

That hit me like a bucket of cold water (and sadly, I knew exactly what *that* felt like, thanks to Zia). "You've met my mother?"

Anubis blinked, as if realizing he'd done something wrong. "I—I know all the dead, but each spirit's path is secret. I should not have spoken."

"You can't just say something like that and then clam up! Is she in the Egyptian afterlife? Did she pass your little Hall of Judgment?"

Anubis glanced uneasily at the golden scales, which shimmered like a mirage in the graveyard. "It is not *my* hall. I merely oversee it until Lord Osiris returns. I'm sorry if I upset you, but I can't say anything more. I don't know why I said anything at all. It's just…your soul has a similar glow. A strong glow."

"How flattering," I grumbled. "My soul glows."

"I'm sorry," he said again. "Please, sit."

I had no interest in letting the matter drop, or sitting with him on a bunch of mummy wrappings, but my direct approach to information gathering didn't seem to be working. I plopped down on the bench and tried to look as annoyed as possible.

"So." I gave him a sulky glare. "What's *that* form, then? Are you a godling?"

He frowned and put his hand to his chest. "You mean, am I inhabiting a human body? No, I can inhabit any graveyard, any place of death or mourning. This is my natural appearance."

"Oh." Part of me had hoped there was an actual boy sitting next to me—someone who just happened to be hosting a god. But I should've known that was too good to be true. I felt disappointed. Then I felt angry with myself for feeling disappointed.

It's not like there was any potential, Sadie, I chided myself. *He's the bloody god of funerals. He's like five thousand years old.*

"So," I said, "if you can't tell me anything useful, at least help me. We need a feather of truth."

He shook his head. "You don't know what you're asking. The feather of truth is too dangerous. Giving it to a mortal would be against the rules of Osiris."

"But Osiris isn't here." I pointed at the empty throne. "That's his seat, isn't it? Do you see Osiris?"

Anubis eyed the throne. He ran his fingers along his gold chain as if it were getting tighter. "It's true that I've waited here for ages, keeping my station. I was not imprisoned like the rest. I don't know why…but I did the best I could. When I heard the five had been released, I hoped Lord Osiris would return, but…" He shook his head dejectedly. "Why would he neglect his duties?"

"Probably because he's trapped inside my dad."

Anubis stared at me. "The baboon did not explain this."

"Well, I can't explain as well as a baboon. But basically my dad wanted to release some gods for reasons I don't quite… Maybe he thought, *I'll just pop down to the British Museum and blow up the Rosetta Stone!* And he released Osiris, but he also got Set and the rest of that lot."

"So Set imprisoned your father while he was hosting Osiris," Anubis said, "which means Osiris has also been trapped by my—" He stopped himself. "By Set."

Interesting, I thought.

"You understand, then," I said. "You've got to help us."

Anubis hesitated, then shook his head. "I can't. I'll get in trouble."

I just stared at him and laughed. I couldn't help it, he sounded so ridiculous. "You'll get in *trouble*? How old are you, sixteen? You're a god!"

It was hard to tell in the dark, but I could swear he blushed. "You don't understand. The feather cannot abide the smallest lie. If I gave it to you, and you spoke a single untruth while you carried it, or acted in a way that was not truthful, you would burn to ashes."

"You're assuming I'm a liar."

He blinked. "No, I simply—"

"You've never told a lie? What were you about to say just now—about Set? He's your father, I'm guessing. Is that it?"

Anubis closed his mouth, then opened it again. He looked as if he wanted to get angry but couldn't quite remember how. "Are you always this infuriating?"

"Usually more," I admitted.

"Why hasn't your family married you off to someone far, far away?"

He asked as if it were an honest question, and now it was my turn to be flabbergasted. "Excuse me, death boy! But I'm twelve! Well…almost thirteen, and a very mature almost thirteen, but that's *not* the point. We don't 'marry off' girls in my family, and you may know everything about funerals, but apparently you aren't very up to speed on courtship rituals!"

Anubis looked mystified. "Apparently not."

"Right! Wait—what were we talking about? Oh, thought you could distract me, eh? I remember. Set's your father, yes? Tell the truth."

Anubis gazed across the graveyard. The sound of the jazz funeral was fading into the streets of the French Quarter.

"Yes," he said. "At least, that's what the legends say. I've never met him. My mother, Nephthys, gave me to Osiris when I was a child."

"She…gave you away?"

"She said she didn't want me to know my father. But in truth, I'm not sure she knew what to do with me. I wasn't like my cousin Horus. I wasn't a warrior. I was a…*different* child."

He sounded so bitter, I didn't know what to say. I mean, I'd asked for the truth, but usually you don't actually *get* it, especially from guys. I also knew something about being the different child—and feeling like my parents had given me away.

"Maybe your mum was trying to protect you," I said. "Your dad being Lord of Evil, and all."

"Maybe," he said halfheartedly. "Osiris took me under his wing. He made me the Lord of Funerals, the Keeper of the Ways of Death. It's a good job, but…you asked how old I am. The truth is I don't know. Years don't pass in the Land of the Dead. I still feel quite young, but the world has gotten old around me. And Osiris has been gone so long… He's the only family I had."

Looking at Anubis in the dim light of the graveyard, I saw a lonely teenage guy. I tried to remind myself that he was a god, thousands of years old, probably able to control vast powers *well* beyond magic toilet paper, but I still felt sorry for him.

"Help us rescue my dad," I said. "We'll send Set back to the Duat, and Osiris will be free. We'll all be happy."

Anubis shook his head again. "I told you—"

"Your scales are broken," I noticed. "That's because Osiris isn't here, I'm guessing. What happens to all the souls that come for judgment?"

I knew I'd hit a nerve. Anubis shifted uncomfortably on the bench. "It increases chaos. The souls become confused. Some cannot go to the afterlife. Some manage, but they must find other ways. I try to help, but…the Hall of Judgment is also called the Hall of Ma'at. It is meant to be the center of order, a stable foundation. Without Osiris, it is falling into disrepair, crumbling."

"Then what are you waiting for? Give us the feather. Unless you're afraid your dad will ground you."

His eyes flashed with irritation. For a moment I thought he was planning *my* funeral, but he simply sighed in exasperation. "I do a ceremony called the opening of the mouth. It lets the soul of the dead person come forth. For you, Sadie Kane, I would invent a new ceremony: the closing of the mouth."

"Ha, ha. Are you going to give me the feather or not?"

He opened his hand. There was a burst of light, and a glowing feather floated above his palm—a snowy plume like a writing quill. "For Osiris's sake—but I will insist on several conditions. First, only you may handle it."

"Well, of course. You don't think I'd let Carter—"

"Also, you must listen to my mother, Nephthys. Khufu told me you were looking for her. If you manage to find her, listen to her."

"Easy," I said, though the request did leave me strangely uncomfortable. Why would Anubis ask something like that?

"And before you go," Anubis continued, "you must answer three questions for me as you hold the feather of truth, to prove that you are honest."

My mouth suddenly felt dry. "Um…what sort of questions?"

"Any that I want. And remember, the slightest lie will destroy you."

"Give me the bloody feather."

As he handed it to me, the feather stopped glowing, but it felt warmer and heavier than a feather should.

"It's the tail feather from a *bennu*," Anubis explained, "what you'd call a phoenix. It weighs exactly the same as a human soul. Are you ready?"

"No," I said, which must've been truthful, as I didn't burn up. "Does that count as one question?"

Anubis actually smiled, which was quite dazzling. "I suppose it does. You bargain like a Phoenician sea trader, Sadie Kane. Second question, then: Would you give your life for your brother?"

"Yes," I said immediately.

(I know. It surprised me too. But holding the feather forced me to be truthful. Obviously it didn't make me any wiser.)

Anubis nodded, apparently not surprised. "Final question: If it means saving the world, are you prepared to lose your father?"

"That's not a fair question!"

"Answer it honestly."

How could I answer something like that? It wasn't a simple yes/no.

Of course I knew the "right" answer. The heroine is supposed to refuse to sacrifice her father. Then she boldly goes off and saves her dad *and* the world, right? But what if it really *was* one or the other? The whole world was an awfully large place: Gran and Gramps, Carter, Uncle Amos, Bast, Khufu, Liz and Emma, everyone I'd ever known. What would my dad say if I chose him instead?

"If…if there really was no other way," I said, "no other way *at all*— Oh, come off. It's a ridiculous question."

The feather began to glow.

"All right," I relented. "If I had to, then I suppose…I suppose I would save the world."

Horrible guilt crushed down on me. What kind of daughter was I? I clutched the *tyet* amulet on my necklace—my one remembrance of Dad. I know some of you lot will be thinking: *You hardly ever saw your dad. You barely knew him. Why would you care so much?*

But that didn't make him any less my dad, did it? Or the thought of losing him forever any less horrible. And the thought of failing him, of *willingly* choosing to let him die even to save the world—what sort of awful person was I?

I could barely meet Anubis's eyes, but when I did, his expression softened.

"I believe you, Sadie."

"Oh, really. I'm holding the bloody feather of truth, and you believe me. Well, thanks."

"The truth is harsh," Anubis said. "Spirits come to the Hall of Judgment all the time, and they *cannot* let go of their lies. They deny their faults, their true feelings, their mistakes…right up until Ammit devours their souls for eternity. It takes strength and courage to admit the truth."

"Yeah. I feel so strong and courageous. Thanks."

Anubis stood. "I should leave you now. You're running out of time. In just over twenty-four hours, the sun will rise on Set's birthday, and he will complete his pyramid—unless you stop him. Perhaps when next we meet—"

"You'll be just as annoying?" I guessed.

He fixed me with those warm brown eyes. "Or perhaps you could bring me up to speed on modern courtship rituals."

I sat there stunned until he gave me a glimpse of a smile—just enough to let me know he was

teasing. Then he disappeared.

"Oh, very funny!" I yelled. The scales and the throne vanished. The linen bench unraveled and dumped me in the middle of the graveyard. Carter and Khufu appeared next to me, but I just kept yelling at the spot where Anubis had stood, calling him some choice names.

"What's going on?" Carter demanded. "Where are we?"

"He's horrible!" I growled. "Self-important, sarcastic, incredibly hot, insufferable—"

"Agh!" Khufu complained.

"Yeah," Carter agreed. "Did you get the feather or not?"

I held out my hand, and there it was—a glowing white plume floating above my fingers. I closed my fist and it disappeared again.

"Whoa," Carter said. "But what about Anubis? How did you—"

"Let's find Bast and get out of here," I interrupted. "We've got work to do."

And I marched out of the graveyard before he could ask me more questions, because I was in no mood to tell the truth.

29. Zia Sets a Rendezvous

[Yeah, thanks a lot, Sadie. You get to tell the part about the Land of the Dead. I get to describe Interstate 10 through Texas.]

Long story short: It took forever and was totally boring, unless your idea of fun is watching cows graze.

We left New Orleans about 1 a.m. on December twenty-eighth, the day before Set planned to destroy the world. Bast had "borrowed" an RV—a FEMA leftover from Hurricane Katrina. At first Bast suggested taking a plane, but after I told her about my dream of the magicians on the exploding flight, we agreed planes might not be a good idea. The sky goddess Nut had promised us safe air travel as far as Memphis, but I didn't want to press our luck the closer we got to Set.

"Set is not our only problem," Bast said. "If your vision is correct, the magicians are closing in on us. And not just *any* magicians—Desjardins himself."

"And Zia," Sadie put in, just to annoy me.

In the end, we decided it was safer to drive, even though it was slower. With luck, we'd make Phoenix just in time to challenge Set. As for the House of Life, all we could do was hope to avoid them while we did our job. Maybe once we dealt with Set, the magicians would decide we were cool. Maybe…

I kept thinking about Desjardins, wondering if he really could be a host for Set. A day ago, it had made perfect sense. Desjardins wanted to crush the Kane family. He'd hated our dad, and he hated us. He'd probably been waiting for decades, even centuries, for Iskandar to die, so he could become Chief Lector. Power, anger, arrogance, ambition: Desjardins had it all. If Set was looking for a soulmate, literally, he couldn't do much better. And if Set could start a war between the gods and magicians by controlling the Chief Lector, the only winner would be the forces of chaos. Besides, Desjardins was an easy guy to hate. *Somebody* had sabotaged Amos's house and alerted Set that Amos was coming.

But the way Desjardins saved all those people on the plane—that just didn't seem like something the Lord of Evil would do.

Bast and Khufu took turns driving while Sadie and I dozed off and on. I didn't know baboons could drive recreational vehicles, but Khufu did okay. When I woke up around dawn, he was navigating through early morning rush hour in Houston, baring his fangs and barking a lot, and none of the other drivers seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary.

For breakfast, Sadie, Bast, and I sat in the RV's kitchen while the cabinets banged open and the dishes clinked and miles and miles of nothing went by outside. Bast had snagged us some snacks and drinks (and Friskies, of course) from a New Orleans all-night convenience store before we left, but

nobody seemed very hungry. I could tell Bast was anxious. She'd already shredded most of the RV's upholstery, and was now using the kitchen table as a scratching post.

As for Sadie, she kept opening and closing her hand, staring at the feather of truth as if it were a phone she wished would ring. Ever since her disappearance in the Hall of Judgment, she'd been acting all distant and quiet. Not that I'm complaining, but it wasn't like her.

"What happened with Anubis?" I asked her for the millionth time.

She glared at me, ready to bite my head off. Then she apparently decided I wasn't worth the effort. She fixed her eyes on the glowing feather that hovered over her palm.

"We talked," she said carefully. "He asked me some questions."

"What kind of questions?"

"Carter, don't ask. Please."

Please? Okay, that really wasn't like Sadie.

I looked at Bast, but she wasn't any help. She was slowly gouging the Formica to bits with her claws.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

She kept her eyes on the table. "In the Land of the Dead, I abandoned you. *Again."*

"Anubis startled you," I said. "It's no big deal."

Bast gave me the big yellow eyes, and I got the feeling I'd only made things worse.

"I made a promise to your father, Carter. In exchange for my freedom, he gave me a job even more important than fighting the Serpent: protecting Sadie—and if it ever became necessary, protecting *both* of you."

Sadie flushed. "Bast, that's…I mean, thank you and all, but we're hardly more important than fighting…you know, *him.*"

"You don't understand," Bast said. "The two of you are not just blood of the pharaohs. You're the most powerful royal children to be born in centuries. You're the only chance we have of reconciling the gods and the House of Life, of relearning the old ways before it's too late. If you could learn the path of the gods, you could find others with royal blood and teach *them.* You could revitalize the House of Life. What your parents did—*everything* they did, was to prepare the way for you."

Sadie and I were silent. I mean, what do you say to something like that? I guessed I'd always felt like my parents loved me, but willing to *die* for me? Believing it was necessary so Sadie and I could do some amazing world-saving stuff? I didn't ask for that.

"They didn't want to leave you alone," Bast said, reading my expression. "They didn't plan on it, but they knew releasing the gods would be dangerous. Believe me, they understood how special you are. At first I was protecting you two because I promised. Now even if I hadn't promised, I would. You two are like kittens to me. I won't fail you again."

I'll admit I got a lump in my throat. I'd never been called someone's kitten before.

Sadie sniffled. She brushed something from under her eye. "You're not going to wash us, are you?"

It was good to see Bast smile again. "I'll try to resist. And by the way, Sadie, I'm proud of you. Dealing with Anubis on your own—those death gods can be nasty customers."

Sadie shrugged. She seemed strangely uncomfortable. "Well, I wouldn't call him *nasty*. I mean, he looked hardly more than a teenager."

"What are you talking about?" I said. "He had the head of a jackal."

"No, when he turned human."

"Sadie…" I was starting to get worried about her now. "When Anubis turned human he *still* had the head of a jackal. He was huge and terrifying and, yeah, pretty nasty. Why, what did he look like to you?"

Her cheeks reddened. "He looked…like a mortal guy."

"Probably a glamour," Bast said.

"No," Sadie insisted. "It couldn't have been."

"Well, it's not important," I said. "We got the feather."

Sadie fidgeted, as if it was *very* important. But then she closed her fist, and the feather of truth disappeared. "It won't do us any good without the secret name of Set."

"I'm working on that." Bast's gaze shifted around the room—she seemed afraid of being overheard. "I've got a plan. But it's dangerous."

I sat forward. "What is it?"

"We'll have to make a stop. I'd rather not jinx us until we get closer, but it's on our way. Shouldn't cause much of a delay."

I tried to calculate. "This is the morning of the second Demon Day?"

Bast nodded. "The day Horus was born."

"And Set's birthday is tomorrow, the third Demon Day. That means we have about twenty-four hours until he destroys North America."

"And if he gets his hands on us," Sadie added, "he'll ramp up his power even more."

"It'll be enough time," Bast said. "It's roughly twenty-four hours driving from New Orleans to Phoenix, and we've already been on the road over five hours. If we don't have any more nasty surprises—"

"Like the kind we have every day?"

"Yes," Bast admitted. "Like those."

I took a shaky breath. Twenty-four hours and it would be over, one way or the other. We'd save Dad and stop Set, or everything would've been for nothing—not just what Sadie and I had done, but all our parents' sacrifices too. Suddenly I felt like I was underground again, in one of those tunnels in the First Nome, with a million tons of rock over my head. One little shift in the ground, and everything would come crashing down.

"Well," I said. "If you need me, I'll be outside, playing with sharp objects."

I grabbed my sword and headed for the back of the RV.

I'd never seen a mobile home with a porch before. The sign on the back door warned me not to use it while the vehicle was in motion, but I did anyway.

It wasn't the best place to practice swordplay. It was too small, and two chairs took up most of the space. The cold wind whipped around me, and every bump in the road threw me off balance. But

it was the only place I could go to be alone. I needed to clear my thoughts.

I practiced summoning my sword from the Duat and putting it back. Soon I could do it almost every time, as long as I kept my focus. Then I practiced some moves—blocks, jabs, and strikes—until Horus couldn't resist offering his advice.

Lift the blade higher, he coached. *More of an arc, Carter. The blade is designed to hook an enemy's weapon.*

Shut up, I grumbled. *Where were you when I needed help on the basketball court?* But I tried holding the sword his way and found he was right.

The highway wound through long stretches of empty scrubland. Once in a while we'd pass a rancher's truck or a family SUV, and the driver would get wide-eyed when he saw me: a black kid swinging a sword on the back of an RV. I'd just smile and wave, and Khufu's driving soon left them in the dust.

After an hour of practice, my shirt was stuck to my chest with cold sweat. My breathing was heavy. I decided to sit and take a break.

"It approaches," Horus told me. His voice sounded more substantial, no longer in my head. I looked next to me and saw him shimmering in a golden aura, sitting back in the other deck chair in his leather armor with his sandaled feet up on the railing. His sword, a ghostly copy of *my* sword, was propped next to him.

"What's approaching?" I asked. "The fight with Set?"

"That, of course," Horus said. "But there is another challenge before that, Carter. Be prepared."

"Great. As if I didn't have enough challenges already."

Horus's silver and gold eyes glittered. "When I was growing up, Set tried to kill me many times. My mother and I fled from place to place, hiding from him until I was old enough to face him. The Red Lord will send the same forces against you. The next will come—"

"At a river," I guessed, remembering my last soul trip. "Something bad is going is happen at a river. But what's the challenge?"

"You must beware—" Horus's image began to fade, and the god frowned. "What's this? Someone is trying to—a different force—"

He was replaced by the glowing image of Zia Rashid.

"Zia!" I stood up, suddenly conscious of the fact that I was sweaty and gross and looked like I'd just been dragged through the Land of the Dead.

"Carter?" Her image flickered. She was clutching her staff, and wore a gray coat wrapped over her robes as if she were standing somewhere cold. Her short black hair danced around her face. "Thank Thoth I found you."

"How did you get here?"

"No time! Listen: we're coming after you. Desjardins, me, and two others. We don't know exactly where you are. Desjardins' tracking spells are having trouble finding you, but he knows we're getting close. And he knows where you're going—Phoenix."

My mind started racing. "So he finally believes Set is free? You're coming to help us?"

Zia shook her head. "He's coming to stop you."

"Stop us? Zia, Set's about to blow up the continent! My dad—" My voice cracked. I hated how

scared and powerless I sounded. "My dad's in trouble."

Zia reached out a shimmering hand, but it was just an image. Our fingers couldn't touch. "Carter, I'm sorry. You have to see Desjardins' point of view. The House of Life has been trying to keep the gods locked up for centuries to prevent something like *this* from happening. Now that you've unleashed them—"

"It wasn't *my* idea!"

"I know, but you're trying to fight Set with divine magic. Gods can't be controlled. You could end up doing even more damage. If you let the House of Life handle this—"

"Set is too strong," I said. "And I *can* control Horus. I can do this."

Zia shook her head. "It will get harder as you get closer to Set. You have no idea."

"And you do?"

Zia glanced nervously to her left. Her image turned fuzzy, like a bad television signal. "We don't have much time. Mel will be out of the restroom soon."

"You've got a magician named Mel?"

"Just listen. Desjardins is splitting us into two teams. The plan is for us to cut you off on either side and intercept you. If *my* team reaches you first, I think I can keep Mel from attacking long enough for us all to talk. Then maybe we can figure out how to approach Desjardins, to convince him we have to cooperate."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but why should I trust you?"

She pursed her lips, looking genuinely hurt. Part of me felt guilty, while part of me worried this was some kind of trick.

"Carter…I have something to tell you. Something that might help, but it has to be said in person."

"Tell me now."

"Thoth's beak! You are impossibly stubborn."

"Yeah, it's a gift."

We locked eyes. Her image was fading, but I didn't want her to go. I wanted to talk longer.

"If you won't trust me, I'll have to trust you," Zia said. "I will arrange to be in Las Cruces, New Mexico, tonight. If you choose to meet me, perhaps we can convince Mel. Then together, we'll convince Desjardins. Will you come?"

I wanted to promise, just to see her, but I imagined myself trying to convince Sadie or Bast that this was a good idea. "I don't know, Zia."

"Just think about it," she pleaded. "And Carter, don't trust Amos. If you see him—" Her eyes widened. "Mel's here!" she whispered.

Zia slashed her staff in front of her, and her image vanished.

30. Bast Keeps a Promise

HOURS LATER, I WOKE UP ON THE RV'S couch with Bast shaking my arm.

"We're here," she announced.

I had no idea how long I'd been asleep. At some point, the flat landscape and complete boredom had zonked me out, and I'd started having bad dreams about tiny magicians flying around in my hair, trying to shave me bald. Somewhere in there, I'd had a nightmare about Amos too, but it was fuzzy. I still didn't understand why Zia would mention him.

I blinked the sleep out of my eyes and realized my head was in Khufu's lap. The baboon was foraging my scalp for munchies.

"Dude." I sat up groggily. "Not cool."

"But he gave you a lovely hairdo," Sadie said.

"Agh-agh!" Khufu agreed.

Bast opened the door of the trailer. "Come on," she said. "We'll have to walk from here."

When I got to the door I almost had a heart attack. We were parked on a mountain road so narrow, the RV would've toppled over if I'd sneezed wrong.

For a second, I was afraid we were already in Phoenix, because the landscape looked similar. The sun was just setting on the horizon. Rugged mountain ranges stretched out on either side, and the desert floor between them seemed to go on forever. In a valley to our left lay a colorless city—hardly any trees or grass, just sand, gravel, and buildings. The city was much smaller than Phoenix, though, and a large river traced its southern edge, glinting red in the fading light. The river curved around the base of the mountains below us before snaking off to the north.

"We're on the moon," Sadie murmured.

"El Paso, Texas," Bast corrected. "And that's the Rio Grande." She took a big breath of the cool dry air. "A river civilization in the desert. Very much like Egypt, actually! *Er,* except for the fact that Mexico is next door. I think this is the best spot to summon Nephthys."

"You really think she'll tell us Set's secret name?" Sadie asked.

Bast considered. "Nephthys is unpredictable, but she has sided against her husband before. We can hope."

That didn't sound very promising. I stared at the river far below. "Why did you park us on the mountain? Why not closer?"

Bast shrugged, as if this hadn't occurred to her. "Cats like to get as high up as possible. In case we have to pounce on something."

"Great," I said. "So if we have to pounce, we're all set."

"It's not so bad," Bast said. "We just climb our way down to the river through a few miles of sand, cacti, and rattlesnakes, looking out for the Border Patrol, human traffickers, magicians, and demons—and summon Nephthys."

Sadie whistled. "Well, I'm excited!"

"Agh," Khufu agreed miserably. He sniffed the air and snarled.

"He smells trouble," Bast translated. "Something bad is about to happen."

"Even *I* could smell that," I grumbled, and we followed Bast down the mountain.

Yes, Horus said. *I remember this place.*

It's El Paso, I told him. *Unless you went out for Mexican food, you've never been here.*

I remember it well, he insisted. *The marsh, the desert.*

I stopped and looked around. Suddenly I remembered this place, too. About fifty yards in front of us, the river spread out into a swampy area—a web of slow-moving tributaries cutting a shallow depression through the desert. Marsh grass grew tall along the banks. There must've been some kind of surveillance, its being an international border and all, but I couldn't spot any.

I'd been here in *ba* form. I could picture a hut right there in the marsh, Isis and young Horus hiding from Set. And just downriver—that's where I'd sensed something dark moving under the water, waiting for me.

I caught Bast's arm when she was a few steps from the bank. "Stay away from the water."

She frowned. "Carter, I'm a *cat*. I'm not going for a swim. But if you want to summon a river goddess, you really need to do it at the riverbank."

She made it sound so logical that I felt stupid, but I couldn't help it. Something bad was about to happen.

What is it? I asked Horus. *What's the challenge?*

But my ride-along god was unnervingly silent, as if waiting.

Sadie tossed a rock into the murky brown water. It sank with a loud *ker-plunk!*

"Seems quite safe to me," she said, and trudged down to the banks.

Khufu followed hesitantly. When he reached the water, he sniffed at it and snarled.

"See?" I said. "Even Khufu doesn't like it."

"It's probably ancestral memory," Bast said. "The river was a dangerous place in Egypt. Snakes, hippos, all kinds of problems."

"Hippos?"

"Don't take it lightly," Bast warned. "Hippos can be *deadly*."

"Was that what attacked Horus?" I asked. "I mean in the old days, when Set was looking for him?"

"Haven't heard that story," Bast said. "Usually you hear that Set used scorpions first. Then later, crocodiles."

"Crocodiles," I said, and a chill went down my back.

Is that it? I asked Horus. But again he didn't answer. "Bast, does the Rio Grande have crocodiles?"

"I very much doubt it." She knelt by the water. "Now, Sadie, if you'd do the honors?"

"How?"

"Just ask for Nephthys to appear. She was Isis's sister. If she's anywhere on this side of the Duat, she should hear your voice."

Sadie looked doubtful, but she knelt next to Bast and touched the water. Her fingertips caused ripples that seemed much too large, rings of force emanating all the way across the river.

"Hullo, Nephthys?" she said. "Anyone home?"

I heard a splash downriver, and turned to see a family of immigrants crossing midstream. I'd heard stories about how thousands of people cross the border from Mexico illegally each year, looking for work and a better life, but it was startling to actually see them in front of me—a man and a woman hurrying along, carrying a little girl between them. They were dressed in ragged clothes and looked poorer than the poorest Egyptian peasants I'd ever seen. I stared at them for a few seconds, but they didn't appear to be any kind of supernatural threat. The man gave me a wary look and we seemed to come to a silent understanding: we both had enough problems without bothering each other.

Meanwhile Bast and Sadie stayed focused on the water, watching the ripples spread out from Sadie's fingers.

Bast tilted her head, listening intently. "What's she saying?"

"I can't make it out," Sadie whispered. "Very faint."

"You can actually hear something?" I asked.

"Shhh," they both said at once.

"'Caged'…" Sadie said. "No, what is that word in English?"

"Sheltered," Bast suggested. "She is sheltered far away. *A sleeping host.* What is *that* supposed to mean?"

I didn't know what they were talking about. I couldn't hear a thing.

Khufu tugged at my hand and pointed downriver. *"Agh."*

The immigrant family had disappeared. It seemed impossible they could cross the river so quickly. I scanned both banks—no sign of them—but the water was more turbulent where they'd been standing, as if someone had stirred it with a giant spoon. My throat tightened.

"Um, Bast—"

"Carter, we can barely hear Nephthys," she said. "Please."

I gritted my teeth. "Fine. Khufu and I are going to check something—"

"Shh!" Sadie said again.

I nodded to Khufu, and we started down the riverbank. Khufu hid behind my legs and growled at the river.

I looked back, but Bast and Sadie seemed fine. They were still staring at the water as if it were some amazing Internet video.

Finally we got to the place where I'd seen the family, but the water had calmed. Khufu slapped the ground and did a handstand, which meant he was either break dancing or really nervous.

"What is it?" I asked, my heart pounding.

"Agh, agh, agh!" he complained. That was probably an entire lecture in Baboon, but I had no

idea what he was saying.

"Well, I don't see any other way," I said. "If that family got pulled into the water or something… I have to find them. I'm going in."

"Agh!" He backed away from the water.

"Khufu, those people had a little girl. If they need help, I can't just walk away. Stay here and watch my back."

Khufu grunted and slapped his own face in protest as I stepped into the water. It was colder and swifter than I'd imagined. I concentrated, and summoned my sword and wand out of the Duat. Maybe it was my imagination, but that seemed to make the river run even faster.

I was midstream when Khufu barked urgently. He was jumping around on the riverbank, pointing frantically at a nearby clump of reeds.

The family was huddled inside, trembling with fear, their eyes wide. My first thought: *Why are they hiding from me?*

"I won't hurt you," I promised. They stared at me blankly, and I wished I could speak Spanish.

Then the water churned around me, and I realized they weren't scared of me. My next thought: *Man, I'm stupid.*

Horus's voice yelled: *Jump!*

I sprang out of the water as if shot from a cannon—twenty, thirty feet into the air. No way I should've been able to do that, but it was a good thing, because a monster erupted from the river beneath me.

At first all I saw were hundreds of teeth—a pink maw three times as big as me. Somehow I managed to flip and land on my feet in the shallows. I was facing a crocodile as long as our RV—and that was just the half sticking out of the water. Its gray-green skin was ridged with thick plates like a camouflage suit of armor, and its eyes were the color of moldy milk.

The family screamed and started scrambling up the banks. That caught the crocodile's attention. He instinctively turned toward the louder, more interesting prey. I'd always thought of crocodiles as slow animals, but when it charged the immigrants, I'd never seen anything move so fast.

Use the distraction, Horus urged. *Get behind it and strike.*

Instead I yelled, "Sadie, Bast, help!" and I threw my wand.

Bad throw. The wand hit the river right in front of the croc, then skipped off the water like a stone, smacked the croc between the eyes, and shot back into my hand.

I doubt I did any damage, but the croc glanced over at me, annoyed.

Or you can smack it with a stick, Horus muttered.

I charged forward, yelling to keep the croc's attention. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the family scrambling to safety. Khufu ran along behind them, waving his arms and barking to herd them out of harm's way. I wasn't sure if they were running from the croc or the crazy monkey, but as long as they kept running, I didn't care.

I couldn't see what was happening with Bast and Sadie. I heard shouting and splashing behind me, but before I could look, the crocodile lunged.

I ducked to the left, slashing with my sword. The blade just bounced off the croc's hide. The monster thrashed sideways, and its snout would've bashed my head in; but I instinctively raised my

wand and the croc slammed into a wall of force, bouncing off as if I were protected by a giant invisible energy bubble.

I tried to summon the falcon warrior, but it was too hard to concentrate with a six-ton reptile trying to bite me in half.

Then I heard Bast scream, "NO!" and I knew immediately, without even looking, that something was wrong with Sadie.

Desperation and rage turned my nerves to steel. I thrust out my wand and the wall of energy surged outward, slamming into the crocodile so hard, it went flying through the air, tumbling out of the river and onto the Mexican shore. While it was on its back, flailing and off balance, I leaped, raising my sword, which was now glowing in my hands, and drove the blade into the monster's belly. I held on while the crocodile thrashed, slowly disintegrating from its snout to the tip of its tail, until I stood in the middle of a giant pile of wet sand.

I turned and saw Bast battling a crocodile just as big as mine. The crocodile lunged, and Bast dropped beneath it, raking her knives across its throat. The croc melted into the river until it was only a smoky cloud of sand, but the damage had been done: Sadie lay in a crumpled heap on the riverbank.

By the time I got there, Khufu and Bast were already at her side. Blood trickled from Sadie's scalp. Her face was a nasty shade of yellow.

"What happened?" I asked.

"It came out of nowhere," Bast said miserably. "Its tail hit Sadie and sent her flying. She never had a chance. Is she…?"

Khufu put his hand on Sadie's forehead and made popping noises with his mouth.

Bast sighed with relief. "Khufu says she'll live, but we have to get her out of here. Those crocodiles could mean…"

Her voice trailed off. In the middle of the river, the water was boiling. Rising from it was a figure so horrible, I knew we were doomed.

"Could mean *that,*" Bast said grimly.

To start with, the guy was twenty feet tall—and I don't mean with a glowing avatar. He was all flesh and blood. His chest and arms were human, but he had light green skin, and his waist was wrapped in a green armored kilt like reptile hide. He had the head of a crocodile, a massive mouth filled with white crooked teeth, and eyes that glistened with green mucus (yeah, I know—real attractive). His black hair hung in plaits down to his shoulders, and bull's horns curved from his head. If that wasn't weird enough, he appeared to be sweating at an unbelievable rate—oily water poured off him in torrents and pooled in the river.

He raised his staff—a length of green wood as big as a telephone pole.

Bast yelled, "Move!" and pulled me back as the crocodile man smashed a five-foot-deep trench in the riverbank where I'd been standing.

He bellowed: "Horus!"

The last thing I wanted to do was say, *Here!* But Horus spoke urgently in my mind: *Face him down. Sobek only understands strength. Do not let him grasp you, or he will pull you down and drown you.*

I swallowed my fear and yelled, "Sobek! You, uh, weakling! How the heck are ya?"

Sobek bared his teeth. Maybe it was his version of a friendly smile. Probably not.

"That form does not serve you, falcon god," he said. "I will snap you in half."

Next to me, Bast slipped her knives from her sleeves. "Don't let him grasp you," she warned.

"Already got the memo," I told her. I was conscious of Khufu off to my right, slowly lugging Sadie uphill. I had to keep this green guy distracted, at least until they were safe. "Sobek, god of…I'm guessing crocodiles! Leave us in peace or we'll destroy you!"

Good, Horus said. "*Destroy" is good.*

Sobek roared with laughter. "Your sense of humor has improved, Horus. You and your kitty will destroy me?" He turned his mucus-filmed eyes on Bast. "What brings you to my realm, cat goddess? I thought you didn't like the *water*!"

On the last word, he aimed his staff and shot forth a torrent of green water. Bast was too quick. She jumped and came down behind Sobek with her avatar fully formed—a massive, glowing cat-headed warrior. "Traitor!" Bast yelled. "Why do you side with chaos? Your duty is to the king!"

"What king?" Sobek roared. "Ra? Ra is gone. Osiris is dead *again,* the weakling! And this boy child cannot restore the empire. There was a time I supported Horus, yes. But he has no strength in this form. He has no followers. Set offers power. Set offers fresh meat. I think I will start with godling flesh!"

He turned on me and swung his staff. I rolled away from his strike, but his free hand shot out and grabbed me around the waist. I just wasn't quick enough. Bast tensed, preparing to launch herself at the enemy, but before she could, Sobek dropped his staff, grasped me with both massive hands, and dragged me into the water. The next thing I knew I was drowning in the cold green murk. I couldn't see or breathe. I sank into the depths as Sobek's hands crushed the air out of my lungs.

Now or never! Horus said. *Let me take control.*

No, I replied. *I'll die first.*

I found the thought strangely calming. If I was already dead, there was no point in being afraid. I might as well go down fighting.

I focused my power and felt strength coursing through my body. I flexed my arms and felt Sobek's grip weaken. I summoned the avatar of the hawk warrior and was instantly encased in a glowing golden form as large as Sobek. I could just see him in the dark water, his slimy eyes wide with surprise.

I broke his grip and head-butted him, breaking off a few of his teeth. Then I shot out of the water and landed on the riverbank next to Bast, who was so startled, she almost slashed me.

"Thank Ra!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah, I'm alive."

"No, I almost jumped in after you. I hate the water!"

Then Sobek exploded out of the river, roaring in rage. Green blood oozed from one of his nostrils.

"You cannot defeat me!" He held out his arms, which were raining perspiration. "I am lord of the water! My sweat creates the rivers of the world!"

Eww. I decided not to swim in rivers anymore. I glanced back, looking for Khufu and Sadie, but they were nowhere in sight. Hopefully Khufu had gotten Sadie to safety, or at least found a good place

to hide.

Sobek charged, and he brought the river with him. A massive wave smashed into me, toppling me to the ground, but Bast jumped and came down on Sobek's back in full avatar form. The weight hardly seemed to bother him. He tried to grab her without any luck. She slashed repeatedly at his arms, back and neck, but his green skin seemed to heal as quickly as she could cut him.

I struggled to my feet, which in avatar form is like trying to get up with a mattress strapped to your chest. Sobek finally managed to grab Bast and throw her off. She tumbled to a stop without getting hurt, but her blue aura was flickering. She was losing power.

We played tag team with the crocodile god—stabbing and slashing—but the more we wounded him, the more enraged and powerful he seemed to get.

"More minions!" he shouted. "Come to me!"

That couldn't be good. Another round of giant crocs and we'd be dead.

Why don't we get minions? I complained to Horus, but he didn't answer. I could feel him struggling to channel his power through me, trying to keep up our combat magic.

Sobek's fist smashed into Bast, and she went flying again. This time when she hit the ground, her avatar flickered off completely.

I charged, trying to draw Sobek's attention. Unfortunately, it worked. Sobek turned and blasted me with water. While I was blind, he slapped me so hard I flew across the riverbank, tumbling through the reeds.

My avatar collapsed. I sat up groggily and found Khufu and Sadie right next to me, Sadie still passed out and bleeding, Khufu desperately murmuring in Baboon and stroking her forehead.

Sobek stepped out of the water and grinned at me. Far downstream in the dim evening light, about a quarter of a mile away, I could see two wake lines in the river, coming toward us fast—Sobek's reinforcements.

From the river, Bast yelled, "Carter, hurry! Get Sadie out of here!"

Her face went pale with strain, and her cat warrior avatar appeared around her one more time. It was weak, though—barely substantial.

"Don't!" I called. "You'll die!"

I tried to summon the falcon warrior, but the effort made my insides burn with pain. I was out of power, and Horus's spirit was slumbering, completely spent.

"Go!" Bast yelled. "And tell your father I kept my promise."

"NO!"

She leaped at Sobek. The two grappled—Bast slashing furiously across his face while Sobek howled in pain. The two gods toppled into the water, and down they went.

I ran to the riverbank. The river bubbled and frothed. Then a green explosion lit the entire length of the Rio Grande, and a small black-and-gold creature shot out of the river as if it had been tossed. It landed on the grass at my feet—a wet, unconscious, half-dead cat.

"Bast?" I picked up the cat gingerly. It wore Bast's collar, but as I watched, the talisman of the goddess crumbled to dust. It wasn't Bast anymore. Only Muffin.

Tears stung my eyes. Sobek had been defeated, forced back to the Duat or something, but there were still two wake lines coming toward us in the river, close enough now that I could see the

monsters' green backs and beady eyes.

I cradled the cat against my chest and turned toward Khufu. "Come on, we have to—"

I froze, because standing right behind Khufu and my sister, glaring at me, was a different crocodile—one that was pure white.

We're dead, I thought. And then, *Wait…a* white *crocodile?*

It opened its mouth and lunged—straight over me. I turned and saw it slam into the two other crocodiles—the giant green ones that had been about to kill me.

"Philip?" I said in amazement, as the crocodiles thrashed and fought.

"Yes," said a man's voice.

I turned again and saw the impossible. Uncle Amos was kneeling next to Sadie, frowning as he examined her head wound. He looked up at me urgently. "Philip will keep Sobek's minions busy, but not for long. Follow me now, and we have a slim chance of surviving!"

SADIE

31. I Deliver a Love Note

I'M GLAD CARTER TOLD THAT LAST BIT—partly because I was unconscious when it happened, partly because I can't talk about what Bast did without going to pieces.

Ah, but more on that later.

I woke feeling as if someone had overinflated my head. My eyes weren't seeing the same things. Out my left, I saw a baboon bum, out my right, my long-lost uncle Amos. Naturally, I decided to focus on the right.

"Amos?"

He laid a cool cloth on my forehead. "Rest, child. You had quite a concussion."

That at least I could believe.

As my eyes began to focus, I saw we were outside under a starry night sky. I was lying on a blanket on what felt like soft sand. Khufu stood next to me, his colorful side a bit too close to my face. He was stirring a pot over a small fire, and whatever he was cooking smelled like burning tar. Carter sat nearby at the top of a sand dune, looking despondent and holding…was that Muffin in his lap?

Amos appeared much as he had when we last saw him, ages ago. He wore his blue suit with matching coat and fedora. His long hair was neatly braided, and his round glasses glinted in the sun. He appeared fresh and rested—not like someone who'd been the prisoner of Set.

"How did you—"

"Get away from Set?" His expression darkened. "I was a fool to go looking for him, Sadie. I had no idea how powerful he'd become. His spirit is tied to the red pyramid."

"So…he doesn't *have* a human host?"

Amos shook his head. "He doesn't need one as long as he has the pyramid. As it gets closer to completion, he gets stronger and stronger. I sneaked into his lair under the mountain and walked right into a trap. I'm ashamed to say he took me without a fight."

He gestured at his suit, showing off how perfectly fine he was. "Not a scratch. Just—*bam.* I was frozen like a statue. Set stood me outside his pyramid like a trophy and let his demons laugh and mock me as they passed by."

"Did you see Dad?" I asked.

His shoulders slumped. "I heard the demons talking. The coffin is inside the pyramid. They're planning to use Osiris's power to augment the storm. When Set unleashes it at sunrise—and it will be *quite* an explosion—Osiris and your father will be obliterated. Osiris will be exiled so deep into the Duat he may never rise again."

My head began to throb. I couldn't believe we had so little time, and if Amos couldn't save Dad, how could Carter and I?

"But you got away," I said, grasping for any good news. "So there must be weaknesses in his defenses or—"

"The magic that froze me eventually began to weaken. I concentrated my energy and worked my way out of the binding. It took many hours, but finally I broke free. I sneaked out at midday, when the demons were sleeping. It was much too easy."

"It doesn't sound easy," I said.

Amos shook his head, obviously troubled. "Set allowed me to escape. I don't know why, but I shouldn't be alive. It's a trick of some sort. I'm afraid…" Whatever he was going to say, he changed his mind. "At any rate, my first thought was to find you, so I summoned my boat."

He gestured behind him. I managed to lift my head and saw we were in a strange desert of white dunes that stretched as far as I could see in the starlight. The sand under my fingers was so fine and white, it might've been sugar. Amos's boat, the same one that had carried us from the Thames to Brooklyn, was beached at the top of a nearby dune, canted at a precarious angle as if it had been thrown there.

"There's a supply locker aboard," Amos offered, "if you'd like fresh clothes."

"But where are we?"

"White Sands," Carter told me. "In New Mexico. It's a government range for testing missiles. Amos said no one would look for us here, so we gave you some time to heal. It's about seven in the evening, still the twenty-eighth. Twelve hours or so until Set…you know."

"But…" Too many questions swam round in my mind. The last thing I remembered, I'd been at the river talking to Nephthys. Her voice had seemed to come from the other side of the world. She'd spoken faintly through the current—so hard to understand, yet quite insistent. She'd told me she was sheltered far away in a sleeping host, which I couldn't make sense of. She'd said she could not appear in person, but that she would send a message. Then the water had started to boil.

"We were attacked." Carter stroked Muffin's head, and I finally noticed that the amulet—*Bast's* amulet—was missing. "Sadie, I've got some bad news."

He told me what had happened, and I closed my eyes. I started to weep. Embarrassing, yes, but I couldn't help it. Over the last few days, I'd lost everything—my home, my ordinary life, my father. I'd been almost killed half a dozen times. My mother's death, which I'd never gotten over to begin with, hurt like a reopened wound. And now Bast was gone too?

When Anubis had questioned me in the Underworld, he'd wanted to know what I would sacrifice to save the world.

What haven't I sacrificed already? I wanted to scream. *What have I got left?*

Carter came over and gave me Muffin, who purred in my arms, but it wasn't the same. It wasn't Bast.

"She'll come back, won't she?" I looked at Amos imploringly. "I mean she's immortal, isn't she?"

Amos tugged at the rim of his hat. "Sadie…I just don't know. It seems she sacrificed herself to defeat Sobek. Bast forced him back to the Duat at the expense of her own life force. She even spared

Muffin, her host, probably with the last shred of her power. If that's true, it would be very difficult for Bast to come back. Perhaps some day, in a few hundred years—"

"No, not a few hundred years! I can't—" My voice broke.

Carter put his hand on my shoulder, and I knew he understood. We *couldn't* lose anyone else. We just couldn't.

"Rest now," Amos said. "We can spare another hour, but then we'll have to get moving."

Khufu offered me a bowl of his concoction. The chunky liquid looked like soup that had died long ago. I glanced at Amos, hoping he'd give me a pass, but he nodded encouragingly.

Just my luck, on top of everything else I had to take baboon medicine.

I sipped the brew, which tasted almost as bad as it smelled, and immediately my eyelids felt heavy. I closed my eyes and slept.

And just when I thought I had this soul-leaving-the-body business sorted, my soul decided to break the rules. Well, it is *my* soul after all, so I suppose that makes sense.

As my *ba* left my body, it kept its human form, which was better than the winged poultry look, but it kept growing and growing until I towered above White Sands. I'd been told many times that I have a lot of spirit (usually not as a compliment), but this was absurd. My *ba* was as tall as the Washington Monument.

To the south, past miles and miles of desert, steam rose from the Rio Grande—the battle site where Bast and Sobek had perished. Even as tall as I was, I shouldn't have been able to see all the way to Texas, especially at night, but somehow I could. To the north, even farther away, I saw a distant red glow and I knew it was the aura of Set. His power was growing as his pyramid neared completion.

I looked down. Next to my foot was a tiny cluster of specks—our camp. Miniature Carter, Amos, and Khufu sat talking round the cooking fire. Amos's boat was no larger than my little toe. My own sleeping form lay curled in a blanket, so small I could've crushed myself with one misstep.

I was enormous, and the world was small.

"That's how gods see things," a voice told me.

I looked around but saw nothing, just the vast expanse of rolling white dunes. Then, in front of me, the dunes shifted. I thought it was the wind, until an entire dune rolled sideways like a wave. Another moved, and another. I realized I was looking at a human form—an enormous man lying in the fetal position. He got up, shaking white sand everywhere. I knelt down and cupped my hands over my companions to keep them from getting buried. Oddly, they didn't seem to notice, as if the disruption were no more than a sprinkle of rain.

The man rose to his full height—at least a head taller than my own giant form. His body was made of sand that curtained off his arms and chest like waterfalls of sugar. The sand shifted across his face until he formed a vague smile.

"Sadie Kane," he said. "I have been waiting for you."

"Geb." Don't ask me how, but I knew instantly that this was the god of the earth. Maybe the sand body was a giveaway. "I have something for you."

It didn't make sense that my *ba* would have the envelope, but I reached into my shimmering

ghostly pocket and pulled out the note from Nut.

"Your wife misses you," I said.

Geb took the note gingerly. He held it to his face and seemed to sniff it. Then he opened the envelope. Instead of a letter, fireworks burst out. A new constellation blazed in the night sky above us—the face of Nut, formed by a thousand stars. The wind rose quickly and ripped the image apart, but Geb sighed contentedly. He closed the envelope and tucked it inside his sandy chest as if there were a pocket right where his heart should be.

"I owe you thanks, Sadie Kane," Geb said. "It has been many millennia since I saw the face of my beloved. Ask me a favor that the earth can grant, and it shall be yours."

"Save my father," I said immediately.

Geb's face rippled with surprise. "*Hmm,* what a loyal daughter! Isis could learn a thing from you. Alas, I cannot. Your father's path is twined with that of Osiris, and matters between the gods cannot be solved by the earth."

"Then I don't suppose you could collapse Set's mountain and destroy his pyramid?" I asked.

Geb's laughter was like the world's largest sand shaker. "I cannot intervene so directly between my children. Set is my son too."

I almost stamped my foot in frustration. Then I remembered I was giant and might smash the whole camp. Could a *ba* do that? Better not to find out. "Well, your favors aren't very useful, then."

Geb shrugged, sloughing off a few tons of sand from his shoulders. "Perhaps some advice to help you achieve what you desire. Go to the place of the crosses."

"And where is that?"

"Close," he promised. "And, Sadie Kane, you are right. You have lost too much. Your family has suffered. I know what that is like. Just remember, a parent would do anything to save his children. I gave up my happiness, my wife—I took on the curse of Ra so that my children could be born." He looked up at the sky wistfully. "And while I miss my beloved more each millennium, I know neither of us would change our choice. I have five children whom I love."

"Even Set?" I asked incredulously. "He's about to destroy millions of people."

"Set is more than he appears," Geb said. "He is our flesh and blood."

"Not mine."

"No?" Geb shifted, lowering himself. I thought he was crouching, until I realized he was melting into the dunes. "Think on it, Sadie Kane, and proceed with care. Danger awaits you at the place of crosses, but you will also find what you need most."

"Could you be a little more vague?" I grumbled.

But Geb was gone, leaving only a taller than normal dune in the sands; and my *ba* sank back into my body.

SADIE

32. The Place of Crosses

I WOKE WITH MUFFIN SNUGGLED on my head, purring and chewing my hair. For a moment, I thought I was home. I used to wake with Muffin on my head all the time. Then I remembered I *had* no home, and Bast was gone. My eyes started tearing up again.

No, Isis's voice chided. *We must stay focused.*

For once, the goddess was right. I sat up and brushed the white sand off my face. Muffin meowed in protest, then waddled two steps and decided she could settle for my warm place on the blanket.

"Good, you're up," Amos said. "We were about to wake you."

It was still dark. Carter stood on the deck of the boat, pulling on a new linen coat from Amos's supply locker. Khufu loped over to me and made a purring sound at the cat. To my surprise, Muffin leaped into his arms.

"I've asked Khufu to take the cat back to Brooklyn," Amos said. "This is no place for her."

Khufu grunted, clearly unhappy with his assignment.

"I know, my old friend," Amos said. His voice had a hard edge; he seemed to be asserting himself as the alpha baboon. "It is for the best."

"Agh," Khufu said, not meeting Amos's eyes.

Unease crept over me. I remembered what Amos said: that his release might have been a trick of Set's. And Carter's vision: Set was *hoping* that Amos would lead us to the mountain so we could be captured. What if Set was influencing Amos somehow? I didn't like the idea of sending Khufu away.

On the other hand, I didn't see much choice but to accept Amos's help. And seeing Khufu there, holding Muffin, I couldn't bear the idea of putting either of them in danger. Maybe Amos had a point.

"Can he travel safely?" I asked. "Out here all by himself?"

"Oh, yes," Amos promised. "Khufu—and all baboons—have their own brand of magic. He'll be fine. And just in case…"

He brought out a wax figurine of a crocodile. "This will help if the need arises."

I coughed. "A crocodile? After what we just—"

"It's Philip of Macedonia," Amos explained.

"Philip is wax?"

"Of course," Amos said. "Real crocodiles are much too difficult to keep. And I *did* tell you he's magic."

Amos tossed the figurine to Khufu, who sniffed it, then stuffed it into a pouch with his cooking supplies. Khufu gave me one last nervous look, glanced fearfully at Amos, then ambled over the dune

with his bag in one arm and Muffin in the other.

I didn't see how they would survive out here, magic or no. I waited for Khufu to appear on the crest of the next dune, but he never did. He simply vanished.

"Now, then," Amos said. "From what Carter has told me, Set means to unleash his destruction tomorrow at sunrise. That gives us very little time. What Carter would *not* explain is how you plan to destroy Set."

I glanced at Carter and saw warning in his eyes. I understood immediately, and felt a flush of gratitude. Perhaps the boy wasn't completely thick. He shared my concerns about Amos.

"It's best we keep that to ourselves," I told Amos flatly. "You said so yourself. What if Set attached a magic listening device to you or something?"

Amos's jaw tightened. "You're right," he said grudgingly. "I can't trust myself. It's just…so frustrating."

He sounded truly anguished, which made me feel guilty. I was tempted to change my mind and tell him our plan, but one look at Carter and I kept my resolve.

"We should head to Phoenix," I said. "Perhaps along the way…"

I slipped my hand into my pocket. Nut's letter was gone. I wanted to tell Carter about my talk with the earth god, Geb, but I didn't know if it was safe in front of Amos. Carter and I had been a team for so many days now, I realized that I resented Amos's presence a little. I didn't want to confide in anyone else. God, I can't believe I just said that.

Carter spoke up. "We should stop in Las Cruces."

I'm not sure who was more surprised: Amos or me.

"That's near here," Amos said slowly. "But…" He picked up a handful of sand, murmured a spell, and threw the sand into the air. Instead of scattering, the grains floated and formed a wavering arrow, pointing southwest toward a line of rugged mountains that made a dark silhouette against the horizon.

"As I thought," Amos said, and the sand fell to the earth. "Las Cruces is out of our way by forty miles—over those mountains. Phoenix is northwest."

"Forty miles isn't so bad," I said. "Las Cruces…" The name seemed strangely familiar to me, but I couldn't decide why. "Carter, why there?"

"I just…" He looked so uncomfortable I knew it must have something to do with Zia. "I had a vision."

"A vision of loveliness?" I ventured.

He looked like he was trying to swallow a golf ball, which confirmed my suspicions. "I just think we should go there," he said. "We might find something important."

"Too risky," Amos said. "I can't allow it with the House of Life on your trail. We should stay in the wilderness, away from cities."

Then suddenly: *click*. My brain had one of those amazing moments when it actually works correctly.

"No, Carter's right," I said. "We have to go there."

It was my brother's turn to look surprised. "I am? We do?"

"Yes." I took the plunge and told them about my talk with Geb.

Amos brushed some sand off his jacket. "That's interesting, Sadie. But I don't see how Las Cruces comes into play."

"Because it's Spanish, isn't it?" I said. "Las Cruces. *The crosses.* Just as Geb told me."

Amos hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. "Get in the boat."

"A bit short on water for a boat ride, aren't we?" I asked.

But I followed him on board. Amos took off his coat and uttered a magic word. Instantly, the coat came to life, drifted to the stern and grasped the tiller.

Amos smiled at me, and some of that old twinkle came back into his eyes. "Who needs water?"

The boat shuddered and lifted into the sky.

If Amos ever got tired of being a magician, he could've gotten a job as a sky boat tour operator. The vista coming over the mountains was quite stunning.

At first, the desert had seemed barren and ugly to me compared to the lush greens of England, but I was starting to appreciate that the desert had its own stark beauty, especially at night. The mountains rose like dark islands in a sea of lights. I'd never seen so many stars above us, and the dry wind smelled of sage and pine. Las Cruces spread out in the valley below—a glowing patchwork of streets and neighborhoods.

As we got closer, I saw that most of the town was nothing very remarkable. It might've been Manchester or Swindon or any place, really, but Amos aimed our ship toward the south of the city, to an area that was obviously much older—with adobe buildings and tree-lined streets.

As we descended, I began to get nervous.

"Won't they notice us in a flying boat?" I asked. "I mean, I know magic is hard to see, but—"

"This is New Mexico," Amos said. "They see UFOs here all the time."

And with that, we landed on the roof of a small church.

It was like dropping back in time, or onto a Wild West film set. The town square was lined with stucco buildings like an Indian pueblo. The streets were brightly lit and crowded—it looked like a festival—with stall vendors selling strings of red peppers, Indian blankets, and other curios. An old stagecoach was parked next to a clump of cacti. In the plaza's bandstand, men with large guitars and loud voices played mariachi music.

"This is the historic area," Amos said. "I believe they call it Mesilla."

"Have a lot of Egyptian stuff here, do they?" I asked dubiously.

"Oh, the ancient cultures of Mexico have a lot in common with Egypt," Amos said, retrieving his coat from the tiller. "But that's a talk for another day."

"Thank god," I muttered. Then I sniffed the air and smelled something strange but wonderful—like baking bread and melting butter, only spicer, yummier. "I—am—*starving*."

It didn't take long, walking the plaza, to discover handmade tortillas. God, they were good. I suppose London has Mexican restaurants. We've got everything else. But I'd never been to one, and I doubt the tortillas would've tasted this heavenly. A large woman in a white dress rolled out balls of dough in her flour-caked hands, flattened and baked the tortillas on a hot skillet, and handed them to us on paper napkins. They didn't need butter or jam or anything. They were so delicate, they just

melted in my mouth. I made Amos pay for about a dozen, just for me.

Carter was enjoying himself too until he tried the red-chili tamales at another booth. I thought his face would explode. "Hot!" he announced. "Drink!"

"Eat more tortilla," Amos advised, trying not to laugh. "Bread cuts the heat better than water."

I tried the tamales myself and found they were excellent, not nearly as hot as a good curry, so Carter was just being a wimp, as usual.

Soon we'd eaten our fill and began wandering the streets, looking for…well, I wasn't sure, exactly. Time was a-wasting. The sun was going down, and I knew this would be the last night for all of us unless we stopped Set, but I had no idea why Geb had sent me here. *You will also find what you need most.* What did that mean?

I scanned the crowds and caught a glimpse of a tall young guy with dark hair. A thrill went up my spine—*Anubis?* What if *he* was following me, making sure I was safe? What if he was what I needed most?

Wonderful thought, except it wasn't Anubis. I scolded myself for thinking I could have luck that good. Besides, Carter had seen Anubis as a jackal-headed monster. Perhaps Anubis's appearance with me was just a trick to befuddle my brain—a trick that worked *quite* well.

I was daydreaming about that, and about whether or not they had tortillas in the Land of the Dead, when I locked eyes with a girl across the plaza.

"Carter." I grabbed his arm and nodded in the direction of Zia Rashid. "Someone's here to see you."

Zia was ready for battle in her loose black linen clothes, staff and wand in hand. Her dark choppy hair was blown to one side like she'd flown here on a strong wind. Her amber eyes looked about as friendly as a jaguar's.

Behind her was a vendor's table full of tourist souvenirs, and a poster that read: NEW MEXICO: LAND OF ENCHANTMENT. I doubted the vendor knew just how much enchantment was standing right in front of his merchandise.

"You came," Zia said, which seemed a bit on the obvious side. Was it my imagination, or was she looking at Amos with apprehension—even fear?

"Yeah," Carter said nervously. "You, uh, remember Sadie. And this is—"

"Amos," Zia said uneasily.

Amos bowed. "Zia Rashid, it's been several years. I see Iskandar sent his best."

Zia looked as if he'd smacked her in the face, and I realized Amos hadn't heard the news.

"*Um,* Amos," I said. "Iskandar is dead."

He stared at us in disbelief as we told him the story.

"I see," he said at last. "Then the new Chief Lector is—"

"Desjardins," I said.

"Ah. Bad news."

Zia frowned. Instead of addressing Amos, she turned to me. "Do not dismiss Desjardins. He's very powerful. You'll need his help—*our* help—to challenge Set."

"Has it ever occurred to you," I said, "that Desjardins might be *helping* Set?"

Zia glared at me. "Never. *Others* might. But not Desjardins."

Clearly she meant Amos. I suppose that should've made me even more suspicious of him, but instead I got angry.

"You're blind," I told Zia. "Desjardins' first order as Chief Lector was to have us killed. He's trying to stop us, even though he *knows* Set is about to destroy the continent. And Desjardins was there that night at the British Museum. If Set needed a body—"

The top of Zia's staff burst into flame.

Carter quickly moved between us. "Whoa, both of you just calm down. We're here to talk."

"I *am* talking," Zia said. "You need the House of Life on your side. You have to convince Desjardins you're not a threat."

"By surrendering?" I asked. "No, thank you. I'd rather not be turned into a bug and squashed."

Amos cleared his throat. "I'm afraid Sadie is right. Unless Desjardins has changed since I last saw him, he is not a man who will listen to reason."

Zia fumed. "Carter, could we speak in *private?"*

He shifted from foot to foot. "Look, Zia, I—I agree we need to work together. But if you're going to try to convince me to surrender to the House—"

"There's something I must tell you," she insisted. "Something you *need* to know."

The way she said that made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. Could this be what Geb meant? Was it possible that Zia held the key to defeating Set?

Suddenly Amos tensed. He pulled his staff out of thin air and said, "It's a trap."

Zia looked stunned. "What? No!"

Then we all saw what Amos had sensed. Marching towards us from the east end of the plaza was Desjardins himself. He wore cream-colored robes with the Chief Lector's leopard-skin cape tied across his shoulders. His staff glowed purple. Tourists and pedestrians veered out of his way, confused and nervous, as if they weren't sure what was going on but they knew enough to clear off.

"Other way," I urged.

I turned and saw two more magicians in black robes marching in from the west.

I pulled my wand and pointed it at Zia. "You set us up!"

"No! I swear—" Her face fell. "Mel. Mel must've told him."

"Right," I grumbled. "Blame Mel."

"No time for explanations," Amos said, and he blasted Zia with a bolt of lightning. She crashed into the souvenir table.

"Hey!" Carter protested.

"She's the enemy," Amos said. "And we have enough enemies."

Carter rushed to Zia's side (naturally) while more pedestrians panicked and scattered for the edges of the square.

"Sadie, Carter," Amos said, "if things go bad, get to the boat and flee."

"Amos, we're not leaving you," I said.

"You're more important," he insisted. "I can hold off Desjardins for— Look out!"

Amos spun his staff towards the two magicians in black. They'd been muttering spells, but Amos's gust of wind swept them off their feet, sending them swirling out of control at the center of a dust devil. They churned along the street, picking up trash, leaves, and tamales, until the miniature tornado tossed the screaming magicians over the top of a building and out of sight.

On the other side of the plaza, Desjardins roared in anger: "Kane!"

The Chief Lector slammed his staff into the ground. A crack opened in the pavement and began snaking towards us. As the crevice grew wider, the buildings trembled. Stucco flaked off the walls. The fissure would've swallowed us, but Isis's voice spoke in my mind, telling me the word I needed.

I raised my wand. "Quiet. *Hah-ri*."

Hieroglyphs blazed to life in front of us:

The fissure stopped just short of my feet. The earthquake died.

Amos sucked in a breath. "Sadie, how did you—"

"Divine Words, Kane!" Desjardins stepped forward, his face livid. "The child dares speak the Divine Words. She is corrupted by Isis, and you are guilty of assisting the gods."

"Step off, Michel," Amos warned.

Part of me found it amusing that Desjardins' first name was Michel, but I was too scared to enjoy the moment.

Amos held out his wand, ready to defend us. "We must stop Set. If you're wise—"

"I would what?" Desjardins said. "Join you? Collaborate? The gods bring nothing but destruction."

"No!" Zia's voice. With Carter's help, she'd somehow managed to struggle to her feet. "Master, we can't fight each other. That's not what Iskandar wanted."

"Iskandar is dead!" Desjardins bellowed. "Now, step away from them, Zia, or be destroyed with them."

Zia looked at Carter. Then she set her jaw and faced Desjardins. "No. We must work together."

I regarded Zia with a new respect. "You really didn't lead him here?"

"I do not lie," she said.

Desjardins raised his staff, and huge cracks appeared in the buildings all around him. Chunks of cement and adobe brick flew at us, but Amos summoned the wind and deflected them.

"Children, get out of here!" Amos yelled. "The other magicians won't stay gone forever."

"For once, he's right," Zia warned. "But we can't make a portal—"

"We've got a flying boat," Carter offered.

Zia nodded appreciatively. "Where?"

We pointed towards the church, but unfortunately Desjardins was between it and us.

Desjardins hurled another volley of stones. Amos deflected them with wind and lightning.

"Storm magic!" Desjardins sneered. "Since when is Amos Kane an expert in the powers of chaos? Do you see this, children? How can he be your protector?"

"Shut up," Amos growled, and with a sweep of his staff he raised a sandstorm so huge that it blanketed the entire square.

"Now," Zia said. We made a wide arc around Desjardins, then ran blindly towards the church. The sandstorm bit my skin and stung my eyes, but we found the stairs and climbed to the roof. The wind subsided, and across the plaza I could see Desjardins and Amos still facing each other, encased in shields of force. Amos was staggering; the effort was clearly taking too much out of him.

"I have to help," Zia said reluctantly, "or Desjardins will kill Amos."

"I thought you didn't trust Amos," Carter said.

"I don't," she agreed. "But if Desjardins wins this duel, we're all dead. We'll never escape." She clenched her teeth as if she were preparing for something really painful.

She held out her staff and murmured an incantation. The air became warm. The staffed glowed. She released it and it burst into flame, growing into a column of fire a full meter thick and four meters tall.

"Hunt Desjardins," she intoned.

Immediately, the fiery column floated off the roof and began moving slowly but deliberately towards the Chief Lector.

Zia crumpled. Carter and I had to grab her arms to keep her from falling on her face.

Desjardins looked up. When he saw the fire, his eyes widened with fear. "Zia!" he cursed. "You *dare* attack me?"

The column descended, passing through the branches of a tree and burning a hole straight through them. It landed in the street, hovering just a few centimeters above the pavement. The heat was so intense that it scorched the concrete curb and melted the tarmac. The fire came to a parked car, and instead of going round, it burned its way straight through the metal chassis, sawing the car in two.

"Good!" Amos yelled from the street. "Well done, Zia!"

In desperation, Desjardins staggered to his left. The column adjusted course. He blasted it with water, but the liquid evaporated into steam. He summoned boulders, but they just passed through the fire and dropped into melted, smoking lumps on the opposite side.

"What *is* that thing?" I asked.

Zia was unconscious, and Carter shook his head in wonder. But Isis spoke in my mind. *A pillar of fire,* she said with admiration. *It is the most powerful spell a master of fire can summon. It is impossible to defeat, impossible to escape. It can be used to lead the summoner toward a goal. Or it can be used to pursue any enemy, forcing him to run. If Desjardins tries to focus on anything else, it will overtake him and consume him. It will not leave him alone until it dissipates.*

How long? I asked.

Depends on the strength of the caster. Between six and twelve hours.

I laughed aloud. Brilliant! Of course Zia had passed out creating it, but it was still brilliant.

Such a spell has depleted her energy, Isis said. *She will not be able to work any magic until the pillar is gone. In order to help you, she has left herself completely powerless.*

"She'll be all right," I told Carter. Then I shouted down to the plaza: "Amos, come on! We've got to go!"

Desjardins kept backing up. I could tell he was scared of the fire, but he wasn't quite done with

us. “You will be sorry for this! You wish to play gods? Then you leave me no choice.” Out of the Duat, he pulled a cluster of sticks. No, they were arrows—about seven of them.

Amos looked at the arrows in horror. “You wouldn’t! No Chief Lector would ever—”

“I summon Sekhmet!” Desjardins bellowed. He threw the arrows into the air and they began to twirl, orbiting Amos.

Desjardins allowed himself a satisfied smile. He looked straight at me. “You choose to place your faith in the gods?” he called. “Then die by the hands of a god.”

He turned and ran. The pillar of fire picked up speed and followed.

“Children, get out of here!” Amos yelled, encircled by the arrows. “I’ll try to distract her!”

“Who?” I demanded. I knew I’d heard the name Sekhmet before, but I’d heard *a lot* of Egyptian names. “Which one is Sekhmet?”

Carter turned to me, and even with all we’d been through over the last week, I had never seen him look so scared. “We need to leave,” he said. *“Now.”*

33. We Go Into the Salsa Business

YOU'RE FORGETTING SOMETHING, Horus told me.

A little busy here! I thought back.

You might think it's easy steering a magic boat through the sky. You'd be wrong. I didn't have Amos's animated coat, so I stood in the back trying to shift the tiller myself, which was like stirring cement. I couldn't see where we were going. We kept tilting back and forth while Sadie tried her best to keep an unconscious Zia from flopping over the side.

It's my birthday, Horus insisted. *Wish me happy birthday!*

"Happy birthday!" I yelled. "Now, shut up!"

"Carter, what are you on about?" Sadie screamed, grabbing the railing with one hand and Zia with the other as the boat tipped sideways. "Have you lost your mind?"

"No, I was talking to—Oh, forget it."

I glanced behind us. *Something* was approaching—a blazing figure that lit up the night. Vaguely humanoid, definitely bad news. I urged the boat to go faster.

Did you get me anything? Horus urged.

Will you please do something helpful? I demanded. *That thing following us—is that what I think it is?*

Oh. Horus sounded bored. *That's Sekhmet. The Eye of Ra, destroyer of the wicked, the great huntress, lady of flame, et cetera.*

Great, I thought. *And she's following us because…*

The Chief Lector has the power to summon her once during his lifetime, Horus explained. *It's an old, old gift—goes back to the days when Ra first blessed man with magic.*

Once during his lifetime, I thought. *And Desjardins chooses now?*

He never was very good at being patient.

I thought that the magicians don't like gods!

They don't, Horus agreed. *Just shows you what a hypocrite he is. But I suppose killing you was more important than standing on principle. I can appreciate that.*

I looked back again. The figure was definitely getting closer—a giant golden woman in glowing red armor, with a bow in one hand and a quiver of arrows slung across her back—and she was hurtling toward us like a rocket.

How do we beat her? I asked.

You pretty much don't, Horus said. *She is the incarnation of the sun's wrath. Back in the days*

when Ra was active, she would've been much more impressive, but still….She's unstoppable. A born killer. A slaying machine—

"Okay, I get it!" I yelled.

"What?" Sadie demanded, so loud that Zia stirred.

"Wha—what?" Her eyes fluttered open.

"Nothing," I shouted. "We're being followed by a slaying machine. Go back to sleep."

Zia sat up woozily. "A slaying machine? You don't mean—"

"Carter, veer right!" Sadie yelled.

I did, and a flaming arrow the size of a predator drone grazed our port side. It exploded above us, setting the roof of our boathouse on fire.

I steered the boat into a dive, and Sekhmet shot past but then pirouetted in the air with irritating agility and dove after us.

"We're burning," Sadie pointed out helpfully.

"Noticed!" I yelled back.

I scanned the landscape below us, but there was nowhere safe to land—just subdivisions and office parks.

"Die, enemies of Ra!" Sekhmet yelled. "Perish in agony!"

She's almost as annoying as you, I told Horus.

Impossible, Horus said. *No one bests Horus.*

I took another evasive turn, and Zia yelled, "There!"

She pointed toward a well-lit factory complex with trucks, warehouses, and silos. A giant chili pepper was painted on the side of the biggest warehouse, and a floodlit sign read: MAGIC SALSA, INC.

"Oh, please," Sadie said. "It's not really magic! That's just a name."

"No," Zia insisted. "I've got an idea."

"Those Seven Ribbons?" I guessed. "The ones you used on Serqet?"

Zia shook her head. "They can only be summoned once a year. But my plan—"

Another arrow blazed past us, only inches from our starboard side.

"Hang on!" I yanked at the tiller and spun the boat upside down just before the arrow exploded. The hull shielded us from the brunt of the blast, but the entire bottom of the ship was now on fire, and we were going down.

With my last bit of control, I aimed the boat toward the roof of the warehouse, and we crashed through, slamming into a huge mound of…something crunchy.

I clawed my way clear of the boat and sat up in a daze. Fortunately, the stuff we'd crashed into was soft. Unfortunately, it was a twenty-foot pile of dried chili peppers, and the boat had set them on fire. My eyes began to sting, but I knew better than to rub them, because my hands were now covered in chili oil.

"Sadie?" I called. "Zia?"

"Help!" Sadie yelled. She was on the other side of the boat, dragging Zia out from under the flaming hull. We managed to pull her free and slide down the pile onto the floor.

The warehouse seemed to be a massive facility for drying peppers, with thirty or forty mountains of chilis and rows of wooden drying racks. The wreckage of our boat filled the air with spicy smoke, and through the hole we'd made in the roof, I could see the blazing figure of Sekhmet descending.

We ran, plowing through another pile of peppers. [No, I didn't pick a peck of them, Sadie—just shut up.] We hid behind a drying rack, where shelves of peppers made the air burn like hydrochloric acid.

Sekhmet landed, and the warehouse floor shuddered. Up close, she was even more terrifying. Her skin glowed like liquid gold, and her chest armor and skirt seemed to be woven of tiles made from molten lava. Her hair was like a thick lion's mane. Her eyes were feline, but they didn't sparkle like Bast's or betray any kindness or humor. Sekhmet's eyes blazed like her arrows, designed only to seek and destroy. She was beautiful the way an atomic explosion is beautiful.

"I smell blood!" she roared. "I will feast on enemies of Ra until my belly is full!"

"Charming," Sadie whispered. "So Zia…this plan?"

Zia didn't look so well. She was shivering and pale, and seemed to have trouble focusing on us. "When Ra…when he first called Sekhmet to punish humans because they were rebelling against him…she got out of hand."

"Hard to imagine," I whispered, as Sekhmet ripped through the burning wreckage of our boat.

"She started killing *everyone,"* Zia said, "not just the wicked. None of the other gods could stop her. She would just kill all day until she was gorged on blood. Then she'd leave until the next day. So the people begged the magicians to come up with a plan, and—"

"You dare hide?" Flames roared as Sekhmet's arrows destroyed pile after pile of dried peppers. "I will roast you alive!"

"Run now," I decided. "Talk later."

Sadie and I dragged Zia between us. We managed to get out of the warehouse just before the whole place imploded from the heat, billowing a spicy-hot mushroom cloud into the sky. We ran through a parking lot filled with semitrailers and hid behind a sixteen-wheeler.

I peeked out, expecting to see Sekhmet walk through the flames of the warehouse. Instead, she leaped out in the form of a giant lion. Her eyes blazed, and floating over her head was a disk of fire like a miniature sun.

"The symbol of Ra," Zia whispered.

Sekhmet roared: "Where are you, my tasty morsels?" She opened her maw and breathed a blast of hot air across the parking lot. Wherever her breath touched, the asphalt melted, cars disintegrated into sand, and the parking lot turned into barren desert.

"How did she do that?" Sadie hissed.

"Her breath creates the deserts," Zia said. "That is the legend."

"Better and better." Fear was closing up my throat, but I knew we couldn't hide much longer. I summoned my sword. "I'll distract her. You two run—"

"No," Zia insisted. "There is another way." She pointed at a row of silos on the other side of the lot. Each one was three stories tall and maybe twenty feet in diameter, with a giant chili pepper painted on the side.

"Petrol tanks?" Sadie asked.

"No," I said. "Must be salsa, right?"

Sadie stared at me blankly. "Isn't that a type of music?"

"It's a hot sauce," I said. "That's what they make here."

Sekhmet breathed in our direction, and the three trailers next to us melted into sand. We scuttled sideways and jumped behind a cinder block wall.

"Listen," Zia gasped, her face beading with sweat. "When the people needed to stop Sekhmet, they got huge vats of beer and colored them bright red with pomegranate juice."

"Yeah, I remember now," I interrupted. "They told Sekhmet it was blood, and she drank until she passed out. Then Ra was able to recall her into the heavens. They transformed her into something gentler. A cow goddess or something."

"Hathor," Zia said. "That is Sekhmet's other form. The flip side of her personality."

Sadie shook her head in disbelief. "So you're saying we offer to buy Sekhmet a few pints, and she'll turn into a cow."

"Not exactly," Zia said. "But salsa is red, is it not?"

We skirted the factory grounds as Sekhmet chewed up trucks and blasted huge swathes of the parking lot to sand.

"I hate this plan," Sadie grumbled.

"Just keep her occupied for a few seconds," I said. "And don't die."

"Yeah, that's the hard bit, isn't it?"

"One…" I counted. "Two…three!"

Sadie burst into the open and used her favorite spell: *"Ha-di!"*

The glyphs blazed over Sekhmet's head:

And everything around her exploded. Trucks burst to pieces. The air shimmered with energy. The ground heaved upward, creating a crater fifty feet deep into which the lioness tumbled.

It was pretty impressive, but I didn't have time to admire Sadie's work. I turned into a falcon and launched myself toward the salsa tanks.

"RRAAAARR!" Sekhmet leaped out of the crater and breathed desert wind in Sadie's direction, but Sadie was long gone. She ran sideways, ducking behind trailers and releasing a few lengths of magical rope as she fled. The ropes whipped through the air and tried to tie themselves around the lioness's mouth. They failed, of course, but they did annoy the Destroyer.

"Show yourself!" Sekhmet bellowed. "I will feast on your flesh!"

Perched on a silo, I concentrated all my power and turned straight from falcon to avatar. My glowing form was so heavy, its feet sank into the top of the tank.

"Sekhmet!" I yelled.

The lioness whirled and snarled, trying to locate my voice.

"Up here, kitty!" I called.

She spotted me and her ears went back. "Horus?"

"Unless you know another guy with a falcon head."

She padded back and forth uncertainly, then roared in challenge. "Why do you speak to me when I am in my raging form? You know I must destroy everything in my path, even you!"

"If you must," I said. "But first, you might like to feast on the blood of your enemies!"

I drove my sword into the tank and salsa gushed out in a chunky red waterfall. I leaped to the next tank and sliced it open. And again, and again, until six silofuls of Magic Salsa were spewing into the parking lot.

"Ha, ha!" Sekhmet loved it. She leaped into the red sauce torrent, rolling in it, lapping it up. "Blood. Lovely blood!"

Yeah, apparently lions aren't too bright, or their taste buds aren't very developed, because Sekhmet didn't stop until her belly was bulging and her mouth literally began to smoke.

"Tangy," she said, stumbling and blinking. "But my eyes hurt. What kind of blood is this? Nubian? Persian?"

"Jalapeño," I said. "Try some more. It gets better."

Her ears were smoking too now as she tried to drink more. Her eyes watered, and she began to stagger.

"I…" Steam curled from her mouth. "Hot…hot mouth…"

"Milk is good for that," I suggested. "Maybe if you were a cow."

"Trick," Sekhmet groaned. "You…you tricked…"

But her eyes were too heavy. She turned in a circle and collapsed, curling into a ball. Her form twitched and shimmered as her red armor melted into spots on her golden skin, until I was looking down at an enormous sleeping cow.

I dropped off the silo and stepped carefully around the sleeping goddess. She was making cow snoring sounds, like *"Moo-zzz, moo-zzz."* I waved my hand in front of her face, and when I was convinced she was out cold, I dispelled my avatar. Sadie and Zia emerged from behind a trailer.

"Well," said Sadie, "that was different."

"I will never eat salsa again," I decided.

"You both did wonderfully," Zia said. "But your boat is burned. How do we get to Phoenix?"

"We?" Sadie said. "I don't recall inviting you."

Zia's face turned salsa red. "Surely you don't *still* think I led you into a trap?"

"I don't know," Sadie said. "Did you?"

I couldn't believe I was hearing this.

"Sadie." My voice sounded dangerously angry, even to myself. "*Lay off.* Zia summoned that pillar-of-fire thing. She sacrificed her magic to save us. *And* she told us how to beat the lioness. We need her."

Sadie stared at me. She glanced back and forth between Zia and me, probably trying to judge how far she could push things.

"Fine." She crossed her arms and pouted. "But we need to find Amos first."

"No!" Zia said. "That would be a very bad idea."

"Oh, so we can trust you, but not Amos?"

Zia hesitated. I got the feeling that was *exactly* what she meant, but she decided to try a different approach. "Amos would not want you to wait. He said to keep going, didn't he? If he survived Sekhmet, he will find us on the road. If not…"

Sadie huffed. "So how do we get to Phoenix? Walk?"

I gazed across the parking lot, where one sixteen-wheeler was still intact. "Maybe we don't have to." I took off the linen coat I'd borrowed from Amos's supply locker. "Zia, Amos had a way of animating his coat so it could steer his boat. Do you know the spell?"

She nodded. "It's fairly simple with the right ingredients. I could do it if I had my magic."

"Can you teach me?"

She pursed her lips. "The hardest part is the figurine. The first time you enchant the piece of clothing, you'd need to smash a *shabti* into the fabric and speak a binding charm to meld them together. It would require a clay or wax figure that has already been imbued with a spirit."

Sadie and I looked at each other, and simultaneously said, "Doughboy!"

34. Doughboy Gives Us a Ride

I SUMMONED DAD'S MAGIC TOOLKIT out of the Duat and grabbed our little legless friend. "Doughboy, we need to talk."

Doughboy opened his wax eyes. "Finally! You realize how stuffy it is in there? At last you've remembered that you need my brilliant guidance."

"Actually we need you to become a coat. Just for a while."

His tiny mouth fell open. "Do I look like an article of clothing? I am the lord of all knowledge! The mighty—"

I smashed him into my jacket, wadded it up, threw it on the pavement and stepped on it. "Zia, what's that spell?"

She told me the words, and I repeated the chant. The coat inflated and hovered in front of me. It brushed itself off and ruffled its collar. If coats can look indignant, this one did.

Sadie eyed it suspiciously. "Can it drive a lorry with no feet for the pedals?"

"Shouldn't be a problem," Zia said. "It's a nice long coat."

I sighed with relief. For a moment, I'd imagined myself having to animate my pants, too. That could get awkward.

"Drive us to Phoenix," I told the coat.

The coat made a rude gesture at me—or at least, it would've been rude if the coat had hands. Then it floated into the driver's seat.

The cab was bigger than I'd thought. Behind the seat was a curtained area with a full-size bed, which Sadie claimed immediately.

"I'll let you and Zia have some quality time," she told me. "Just the two of you and your coat."

She ducked behind the curtains before I could smack her.

The coat drove us west on I-10 as a bank of dark clouds swallowed the stars. The air smelled like rain.

After a long time, Zia cleared her throat. "Carter, I'm sorry about…I mean, I wish the circumstances were better."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess you'll get in a lot of trouble with the House."

"I will be shunned," she said. "My staff broken. My name blotted from the books. I'll be cast into exile, assuming they don't kill me."

I thought about Zia's little shrine in the First Nome—all those pictures of her village and her family that she didn't remember. As she talked about getting exiled, she had the same expression on

her face that she had worn then: not regret or sadness, more like confusion, as if she herself couldn't figure out why she was rebelling, or what the First Nome had meant to her. She'd said Iskandar was like her only family. Now she had no one.

"You could come with us," I said.

She glanced over. We were sitting close together, and I was very aware of her shoulder pressing against mine. Even with the reek of burned peppers on both of us, I could smell her Egyptian perfume. She had a dried chili stuck in her hair, and somehow that made her look even cuter.

Sadie says my brain was just addled. [Seriously, Sadie, I don't interrupt this much when *you're* telling the story.]

Anyway, Zia looked at me sadly. "Where would we go, Carter? Even if you defeat Set and save this continent, what will you do? The House will hunt you down. The gods will make your life miserable."

"We'll figure it out," I promised. "I'm used to traveling. I'm good at improvising, and Sadie's not *all* bad."

"I heard that!" Sadie's muffled voice came through the curtain.

"And with you," I continued, "I mean, you know, with your magic, things would be easier."

Zia squeezed my hand, which sent a tingle up my arm. "You're kind, Carter. But you don't know me. Not really. I suppose Iskandar saw this coming."

"What do you mean?"

Zia took her hand away, which kind of bummed me out. "When Desjardins and I came back from the British Museum, Iskandar spoke to me privately. He said I was in danger. He said he would take me somewhere safe and…" Her eyebrows knit together. "That's odd. I don't remember."

A cold feeling started gnawing at me. "Wait, *did* he take you somewhere safe?"

"I…I think so." She shook her head. "No, he couldn't have, obviously. I'm still here. Perhaps he didn't have time. He sent me to find you in New York almost immediately."

Outside, a light rain began to fall. The coat turned on our windshield wipers.

I didn't understand what Zia had told me. Perhaps Iskandar had sensed a change in Desjardins, and he was trying to protect his favorite student. But something else about the story bothered me—something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Zia stared into the rain as if she saw bad things out there in the night.

"We're running out of time," she said. "He's coming back."

"Who's coming back?"

She looked at me urgently. "The thing I needed to tell you—the thing you need. It's Set's secret name."

The storm surged. Thunder crackled and the truck shuddered in the wind.

"H-hold on," I stammered. "How could you know Set's name? How did you even know we needed it?"

"You stole Desjardins' book. Desjardins told us about it. He said it didn't matter. He said you could not use the spell without Set's secret name, which is impossible to get."

"So how do *you* know it? Thoth said it could only come from Set himself, or from the person…"

My voice trailed off as a horrible thought occurred to me. "Or from the person closest to him."

Zia shut her eyes as if in pain. "I—I can't explain it, Carter. I just have this voice telling me the name—"

"The fifth goddess," I said, "Nephthys. You were there too at the British Museum."

Zia looked completely stunned. "No. That's impossible."

"Iskandar said you were in danger. He wanted to take you somewhere safe. That's what he meant. You're a godling."

She shook her head stubbornly. "But he *didn't* take me away. I'm right here. If I were hosting a god, the other magicians of the House would've figured it out days ago. They know me too well. They would've noticed the changes in my magic. Desjardins would've destroyed me."

She had a point—but then another terrible thought occurred to me. "Unless Set is controlling him," I said.

"Carter, are you really so blind? Desjardins is not Set."

"Because you think it's Amos," I said. "Amos who risked his life to save us, who told us to keep going without him. Besides, Set doesn't need a human form. He's using the pyramid."

"Which you know because…?"

I hesitated. "Amos told us."

"This is getting us nowhere," Zia said. "I know Set's secret name, and I can tell you. But you must promise you will not tell Amos."

"Oh, come on. Besides, if you know the name, why can't you just use it yourself?"

She shook her head, looking almost as frustrated as I felt. "I don't know why…. I just know it's not my role to play. It must be you or Sadie—blood of the pharaohs. If you don't—"

The truck slowed abruptly. Out the front windshield, about twenty yards ahead, a man in a blue coat was standing in our headlights. It was Amos. His clothes were tattered like he'd been sprayed with a shotgun, but otherwise he looked okay. Before the truck had even stopped completely, I jumped out of the cab and ran to meet him.

"Amos!" I cried. "What happened?"

"I distracted Sekhmet," he said, putting a finger through one of the holes in his coat. "For about eleven seconds. I'm glad to see you survived."

"There was a salsa factory," I started to explain, but Amos held up his hand.

"Time for explanations later," he said. "Right now we have to get going."

He pointed northwest, and I saw what he meant. The storm was worse up ahead. A *lot* worse. A wall of black blotted out the night sky, the mountains, the highway, as if it would swallow the whole world.

"Set's storm is gathering," Amos said with a twinkle in his eyes. "Shall we drive into it?"

SADIE

35. Men Ask for Directions (and Other Signs of the Apocalypse)

I DON'T KNOW HOW I MANAGED IT with Carter and Zia yammering, but I got some sleep in the back of the truck. Even after the excitement of seeing Amos alive, as soon as we got going again I was back in the bunk and drifting off. I suppose a good *ha-di* spell can really take it out of you.

Naturally, my *ba* took this as an opportunity to travel. Heaven forbid I get some *peaceful* rest.

I found myself back in London, on the banks of the Thames. Cleopatra's Needle rose up in front of me. It was a gray day, cool and calm, and even the smell of the low-tide muck made me feel homesick.

Isis stood next to me in a cloud-white dress, her dark hair braided with diamonds. Her multicolored wings faded in and out behind her like the Northern Lights.

"Your parents had the right idea," she said. "Bast was failing."

"She was my friend," I said.

"Yes. A good and loyal servant. But chaos cannot be kept down forever. It grows. It seeps into the cracks of civilization, breaks down the edges. It cannot be kept in balance. That is simply its nature."

The obelisk rumbled, glowing faintly.

"Today it is the American continent," Isis mused. "But unless the gods are rallied, unless we achieve our full strength, chaos will soon destroy the entire human world."

"We're doing our best," I insisted. "We'll beat Set."

Isis looked at me sadly. "You know that's not what I mean. Set is only the beginning."

The image changed, and I saw London in ruins. I'd seen some horrific photos of the Blitz in World War II, but that was nothing compared to this. The city was leveled: rubble and dust for miles, the Thames choked with flotsam. The only thing standing was the obelisk, and as I watched, it began to crack open, all four sides peeling away like some ghastly flower unfolding.

"Don't show me this," I pleaded.

"It will happen soon enough," Isis said, "as your mother foresaw. But if you cannot face it…"

The scene changed again. We stood in the throne room of a palace—the same one I'd seen before, where Set had entombed Osiris. The gods were gathering, materializing as streams of light that shot through the throne room, curled round the pillars, and took on human form. One became Thoth with his stained lab coat, his wire-rimmed glasses, and his hair standing out all over his head. Another became Horus, the proud young warrior with silver and gold eyes. Sobek, the crocodile god, gripped his watery staff and snarled at me. A mass of scorpions scuttled behind a column and

emerged on the other side as Serqet, the brown-robed arachnid goddess. Then my heart leaped, because I noticed a boy in black standing in the shadows behind the throne: Anubis, his dark eyes studying me with regret.

He pointed at the throne, and I saw it was empty. The palace was missing its heart. The room was cold and dark, and it was impossible to believe this had once been a place of celebrations.

Isis turned to me. "We need a ruler. Horus must become pharaoh. He must unite the gods and the House of Life. It is the only way."

"You can't mean Carter," I said. "My mess of a brother—pharaoh? Are you joking?"

"We have to help him. You and I."

The idea was so ridiculous I would have laughed had the gods not been staring at me so gravely.

"Help him?" I said. "Why doesn't he help *me* become pharaoh?"

"There have been strong women pharaohs," Isis admitted. "Hatshepsut ruled well for many years. Nefertiti's power was equal to her husband's. But you have a different path, Sadie. Your power will not come from sitting on a throne. I think you know this."

I looked at the throne, and I realized Isis had a point. The idea of sitting there with a crown on my head, trying to rule this lot of bad-tempered gods, did not appeal to me in the slightest. Still… Carter?

"You've grown strong, Sadie," Isis said. "I don't think you realize *how* strong. Soon, we will face the test together. We will prevail, if you maintain your courage and faith."

"Courage and faith," I said. "Not my two strong suits."

"Your moment comes," Isis said. "We depend on you."

The gods gathered round, staring at me expectantly. They began to crowd in, pressing so close I couldn't breathe, grabbing my arms, shaking me….

I woke to find Zia poking my shoulder. "Sadie, we've stopped."

I instinctively reached for my wand. "What? Where?"

Zia pushed aside the curtains of the sleeping berth and leaned over me from the front seat, unnervingly like a vulture. "Amos and Carter are in the gas station. You need to be prepared to move."

"Why?" I sat up and looked out the windshield, straight into a raging sandstorm. "Oh…"

The sky was black, so it was impossible to tell if it was day or night. Through the gale of wind and sand, I could see we were parked in front of a lighted petrol station.

"We're in Phoenix," Zia said, "but most of the city is shut down. People are evacuating."

"Time?"

"Half past four in the morning," Zia said. "Magic isn't working very well. The closer we get to the mountain, the worse it is. And the truck's GPS system is down. Amos and Carter went inside to ask directions."

That didn't sound promising. If two male magicians were desperate enough to stop for directions, we were in dire straits.

The truck's cab shook in the howling wind. After all we'd been through, I felt silly being scared

of a storm, but I climbed over the seat so I could sit next to Zia and have some company.

"How long have they been in there?" I asked.

"Not long," Zia said. "I wanted to talk to you before they come back."

I raised an eyebrow. "About Carter? Well, if you're wondering whether he likes you, the way he stammers might be an indication."

Zia frowned. "No, I'm—"

"Asking if I mind? Very considerate. I must say at first I had my doubts, what with you threatening to kill us and all, but I've decided you're not a bad sort, and Carter's mad about you, so —"

"It's not about Carter."

I wrinkled my nose. "Oops. Could you just forget what I said, then?"

"It's about Set."

"God," I sighed. "Not this again. Still suspicious of Amos?"

"You're blind not to see it," Zia said. "Set loves deception and traps. It is his favorite way to kill."

Part of me knew she had a point. No doubt you'll think I was foolish not to listen. But have you ever sat by while someone talks badly about a member of your family? Even if it's not your favorite relative, the natural reaction is to defend them—at least it was for me, possibly because I didn't have that much family to begin with. "Look, Zia, I can't believe Amos would—"

"*Amos* wouldn't," Zia agreed. "But Set can bend the mind and control the body. I'm not a specialist on possession, but it was a very common problem in ancient times. Minor demons are difficult enough to dislodge. A major god—"

"He's *not* possessed. He *can't* be." I winced. A sharp pain was burning in my palm, in the spot where I'd last held the feather of truth. But I wasn't telling a lie! I *did* believe Amos was innocent… didn't I?

Zia studied my expression. "You need Amos to be all right. He is your uncle. You've lost too many members of your family. I understand that."

I wanted to snap back that she didn't understand anything, but her tone made me suspect she had known grief—possibly even more than I.

"We've got no choice," I said. "There's what, three hours till sunrise? Amos knows the best way into the mountain. Trap or no, we have to go there and try to stop Set."

I could almost see the gears spinning in her head as she searched for some way, *any* way to convince me.

"All right," she said at last. "I wanted to tell Carter something but I never got the opportunity. I'll tell you instead. The last thing you need to stop Set—"

"You couldn't possibly know his secret name."

Zia held my gaze. Maybe it was the feather of truth, but I was certain she wasn't bluffing. She *did* have the name of Set. Or at least, she *believed* she did.

And honestly, I'd overheard bits of her conversation with Carter while I was in the back of the cab. I hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but it was hard not to. I looked at Zia, and tried to believe she was

hosting Nephthys, but it didn't make any sense. I'd spoken with Nephthys. She'd told me she was far away in some sort of sleeping host. And Zia was right here in front of me.

"It will work," Zia insisted. "But I can't do it. It must be *you*."

"Why not use it yourself?" I demanded. "Because you spent all your magic?"

She waved away the question. "Just promise me you will use it *now,* on Amos, before we reach the mountain. It may be your only chance."

"And if you're wrong, we waste the only chance we have. The book disappears once it's used, right?"

Grudgingly, Zia nodded. "Once read, the book will dissolve and appear somewhere else in the world. But if you wait any longer, we're doomed. If Set lures you into his base of power, you'll never have the strength to confront him. Sadie, please—"

"Tell me the name," I said. "I promise I'll use it at the right time."

"Now is the right time."

I hesitated, hoping Isis would drop some words of wisdom, but the goddess was silent. I don't know if I would've relented. Perhaps things would've turned out differently if I'd agreed to Zia's plan. But before I could make that choice, the truck's doors opened, and Amos and Carter climbed in with a gust of sand.

"We're close." Amos smiled as if this were good news. "Very, very close."

SADIE

36. Our Family Is Vaporized

LESS THAN A MILE FROM Camelback Mountain, we broke through into a circle of perfect calm.

"Eye of the storm," Carter guessed.

It was eerie. All around the mountain swirled a cylinder of black clouds. Traces of smoke drifted back and forth from Camelback's peak to the edges of the maelstrom like the spokes of a wheel, but directly above us, the sky was clear and starry, beginning to turn gray. Sunrise wasn't far off.

The streets were empty. Mansions and hotels clustered round the mountain's base, completely dark; but the mountain itself glowed. Ever hold your hand over a torch (sorry, a *flashlight* for you Americans) and watch the way your skin glows red? That's the way the mountain looked: something very bright and hot was trying to burn through the rock.

"Nothing's moving on the streets," Zia said. "If we try to drive up to the mountain—"

"We'll be seen," I said.

"What about that spell?" Carter looked at Zia. "You know…the one you used in the First Nome."

"What spell?" I asked.

Zia shook her head. "Carter is referring to an invisibility spell. But I have no magic. And unless you have the proper components, it can't be done on a whim."

"Amos?" I asked.

He pondered the question. "No invisibility, I'm afraid. But I have another idea."

I thought turning into a bird was bad, until Amos turned us into storm clouds.

He explained what he was going to do in advance, but it didn't make me any less nervous.

"No one will notice a few wisps of black cloud in the midst of a storm," he reasoned.

"But this is impossible," Zia said. "This is storm magic, *chaos* magic. We should not—"

Amos raised his wand, and Zia disintegrated.

"No!" Carter yelled, but then he too was gone, replaced by a swirl of black dust.

Amos turned to me.

"Oh, no," I said. "Thanks, but—"

Poof. I was a storm cloud. Now, that may sound amazing to you, but imagine your hands and feet disappearing, turning into wisps of wind. Imagine your body replaced by dust and vapor, and having a tingly feeling in your stomach without even *having* a stomach. Imagine having to concentrate just to keep yourself from dispersing to nothing.

I got so angry, a flash of lightning crackled inside me.

"Don't be that way," Amos chided. "It's only for a few minutes. Follow me."

He melted into a heavier, darker bit of storm and raced towards the mountain. Following wasn't easy. At first I could only float. Every wind threatened to take some part of me away. I tried swirling and found it helped keep my particles together. Then I imagined myself filling with helium, and suddenly I was off.

I couldn't be sure if Carter and Zia were following or not. When you're a storm, your vision isn't human. I could vaguely sense what was around me, but what I "saw" was scattered and fuzzy, as if through heavy static.

I headed towards the mountain, which was an almost irresistible beacon to my storm self. It glowed with heat, pressure, and turbulence—everything a little dust devil like me could want.

I followed Amos to a ridge on the side of the mountain, but I returned to human form a little too soon. I tumbled out of the sky and knocked Carter to the ground.

"Ouch," he groaned.

"Sorry," I offered, though mostly I was concentrating on not getting sick. My stomach still felt like it was mostly storm.

Zia and Amos stood next to us, peeping into a crevice between two large sandstone boulders. Red light seeped from within and made their faces look devilish.

Zia turned to us. Judging from her expression, what she'd seen wasn't good. "Only the pyramidion left."

"The what?" I looked through the crevice, and the view was almost as disorienting as being a storm cloud. The entire mountain was hollowed out, just as Carter had described. The cavern floor was about six hundred meters below us. Fires blazed everywhere, bathing the rock walls in blood-colored light. A giant crimson pyramid dominated the cave, and at its base, masses of demons milled about like a rock concert crowd waiting for the show to begin. High above them, eye-level to us, two magic barges manned by crews of demons floated slowly, ceremoniously towards the pyramid. Suspended in a mesh of ropes between the boats was the only piece of the pyramid not yet installed—a golden capstone to top off the structure.

"They know they've won," Carter guessed. "They're making a show of it."

"Yes," Amos said.

"Well, let's blow up the boats or something!" I said.

Amos looked at me. "Is *that* your strategy, honestly?"

His tone made me feel completely stupid. Looking down on the demon army, the enormous pyramid…what had I been thinking? I couldn't battle this. I was a bloody twelve-year-old.

"We have to try," Carter said. "Dad's in there."

That shook me out of my self-pity. If we were going to die, at least we would do it trying to rescue my father (oh, and North America, too, I suppose).

"Right," I said. "We fly to those boats. We stop them from placing the capstone—"

"Pyramidion," Zia corrected.

"Whatever. Then we fly into the pyramid and find Dad."

"And when Set tries to stop you?" Amos asked.

I glanced at Zia, who was silently warning me not to say more.

"First things first," I said. "How do we fly to the boats?"

"As a storm," Amos suggested.

"No!" the rest of us said.

"I will not be part of more chaos magic," Zia insisted. "It is *not* natural."

Amos waved at the spectacle below us. "Tell me *this* is natural. You have another plan?"

"Birds," I said, hating myself for even considering it. "I'll become a kite. Carter can do a falcon."

"Sadie," Carter warned, "what if—"

"I have to try." I looked away before I could lose my resolve. "Zia, it's been almost ten hours since your pillar of fire, hasn't it? Still no magic?"

Zia held out her hand and concentrated. At first, nothing happened. Then red light flickered along her fingers, and her staff appeared in her grip, still smoking.

"Good timing," Carter said.

"Also bad timing," Amos observed. "It means Desjardins is no longer pursued by the pillar of fire. He'll be here soon, and I'm sure he'll bring backup. More enemies for us."

"My magic will still be weak," Zia warned. "I won't be much help in a fight, but I can perhaps manage to summon a ride." She brought out the vulture pendant she'd used at Luxor.

"Which leaves me," Amos said. "No worries there. Let's meet on the left boat. We'll take that one out, then deal with the right. And let's hope for surprise."

I wasn't in the mood to let Amos set our plans, but I couldn't find any fault with his logic. "Right. We'll have to finish the boats off quickly, then head into the pyramid itself. Perhaps we can seal off the entrance or something."

Carter nodded. "Ready."

At first, the plan seemed to go well. Turning into a kite was no problem, and to my surprise, once I reached the prow of the ship, I managed to turn back into a human on the first try, with my staff and wand ready. The only person more surprised was the demon right in front of me, whose switchblade head popped straight up in alarm.

Before he could slice me or even cry out, I summoned wind from my staff and blew him off the side of the boat. Two of his brethren charged forward, but Carter appeared behind them, sword drawn, and sliced them into piles of sand.

Unfortunately, Zia was a bit less stealthy. A giant vulture with a girl hanging from its feet tends to attract attention. As she flew towards the boat, demons below pointed and yelled. Some threw spears that fell short of their mark.

Zia's grand entrance did manage to distract the remaining two demons on our boat, however, which allowed Amos to appear behind them. He'd taken the form of a fruit bat, which brought back bad memories; but he quickly returned to human form and body-slammed the demons, sending them tumbling into the air.

"Hold on!" he told us. Zia landed just in time to grab the tiller. Carter and I grabbed the sides of

the boat. I had no idea what Amos was planning, but after my last flying boat ride, I wasn't taking chances. Amos began to chant, pointing his staff towards the other boat, where the demons were just beginning to shout and point at us.

One of them was tall and very thin, with black eyes and a disgusting face, like muscle with the skin peeled away.

"That's Set's lieutenant," Carter warned. "Face of Horror."

"You!" the demon screamed. "Get them!"

Amos finished his spell. "Smoke," he intoned.

Instantly, the second boat evaporated into gray mist. The demons fell screaming. The golden capstone plummeted until the lines attached to it from our side yanked taut, and our boat nearly flipped over. Canted sideways, we began to sink towards the cavern floor.

"Carter, cut the lines!" I screamed.

He sliced them with his sword, and the boat leveled out, rising several meters in an instant and leaving my stomach behind.

The pyramidion crashed to the cavern floor with much crunching and squishing. I had the feeling we'd just made a nice stack of demon griddlecakes.

"So far so good," Carter noted, but as usual, he'd spoken too soon.

Zia pointed below us. "Look."

All those demons who had wings—a small percentage, but still a good forty or fifty—had launched themselves towards us, filling the air like a swarm of angry wasps.

"Fly to the pyramid," Amos said. "I'll distract the demons."

The pyramid's entrance, a simple doorway between two columns at the base of the structure, was not far from us. It was guarded by a few demons, but most of Set's forces were running towards our boat, screaming and throwing rocks (which tended to fall back down and hit them, but no one says demons are bright).

"They're too many," I argued. "Amos, they'll kill you."

"Don't worry about me," he said grimly. "Seal the entrance behind you."

He pushed me over the side, giving me no choice but to turn into a kite. Carter in falcon form was already spiraling towards the entrance, and I could hear Zia's vulture flapping its great wings behind us.

I heard Amos yell, "For Brooklyn!"

It was an odd battle cry. I glanced back, and the boat burst into flames. It began drifting away from the pyramid and down towards the army of monsters. Fireballs shot from the boat in all directions as pieces of the hull crumbled away. I didn't have time to marvel at Amos's magic, or worry what had happened to him. He distracted many of the demons with his pyrotechnics, but some noticed us.

Carter and I landed just inside the pyramid's entrance and returned to human form. Zia tumbled in next to us and turned her vulture back into an amulet. The demons were only a few steps behind—a dozen massive blokes with the heads of insects, dragons, and assorted Swiss Army knife attachments.

Carter thrust out his hand. A giant shimmering fist appeared and mimicked his move—pushing right between Zia and me and slamming the doors shut. Carter closed his eyes in concentration, and a

burning golden symbol etched itself across the doors like a seal: the Eye of Horus. The lines glowed faintly as demons hammered against the barrier, trying to get in.

"It won't hold them long," Carter said.

I was duly impressed, though of course I didn't say that. Looking at the sealed doors, all I could think about was Amos, out there on a burning boat, surrounded by an evil army.

"Amos knew what he was doing," Carter said, though he didn't sound very convinced. "He's probably fine."

"Come on," Zia prodded us. "No time for second guessing."

The tunnel was narrow, red, and humid, so I felt like I was crawling through an artery of some enormous beast. We made our way down single file, as the tunnel sloped at about forty degrees—which would've made a lovely waterslide but wasn't so good for stepping carefully. The walls were decorated with intricate carvings, like most Egyptian walls we'd seen, but Carter obviously didn't like them. He kept stopping, scowling at the pictures.

"What?" I demanded, after the fifth or sixth time.

"These aren't normal tomb drawings," he said. "No afterlife pictures, no pictures of the gods."

Zia nodded. "This pyramid is not a tomb. It is a platform, a body to contain the power of Set. All these pictures are to increase chaos, and make it reign forever."

As we kept walking, I paid more attention to the carvings, and I saw what Zia meant. The pictures showed horrible monsters, scenes of war, cities such as Paris and London in flames, full-color portraits of Set and the Set animal tearing into modern armies—scenes so gruesome, no Egyptian would ever commit them to stone. The farther we went, the weirder and more vivid the pictures became, and the queasier I felt.

Finally we reached the heart of the pyramid.

Where the burial chamber should've been in a regular pyramid, Set had designed a throne room for himself. It was about the size of a tennis court, but around the edges, the floor dropped off into a deep trench like a moat. Far, far below, red liquid bubbled. Blood? Lava? Evil ketchup? None of the possibilities were good.

The trench looked easy enough to jump, but I wasn't anxious to do so because inside the room, the entire floor was carved with red hieroglyphs—all spells invoking the power of Isfet, chaos. Far above in the center of the ceiling, a single square hole let in blood-red light. Otherwise, there seemed to be no exits. Along either wall crouched four obsidian statues of the Set animal, their faces turned towards us with pearl teeth bared and emerald eyes glittering.

But the worst part was the throne itself. It was a horrid misshapen thing, like a red stalagmite that had grown haphazardly from centuries of dripping sediment. And it had formed itself around a gold coffin—*Dad's* coffin—which was buried in the throne's base, with just enough of it sticking out to form a kind of footrest.

"How do we get him out?" I said, my voice trembling.

Next to me, Carter caught his breath. "Amos?"

I followed his gaze up to the glowing red vent in the middle of the ceiling. A pair of legs dangled from the opening. Then Amos dropped down, opening his cloak like a parachute so that he floated to the floor. His clothes were still smoking, his hair dusted with ash. He pointed his staff towards the

ceiling and spoke a command. The shaft he'd come through rumbled, spilling dust and rubble, and the light was abruptly cut off.

Amos dusted off his clothes and smiled at us. "That should hold them for a while."

"How did you do that?" I asked.

He gestured for us to join him in the room.

Carter jumped the trench without hesitation. I didn't like it, but I wasn't going to let him go without me, so I hopped the trench too. Immediately I felt even queasier than before, as if the room were tilting, throwing my senses off balance.

Zia came over last, eyeing Amos carefully.

"You should not be alive," she said.

Amos chuckled. "Oh, I've heard that before. Now, let's get to business."

"Yes." I stared at the throne. "How do we get the coffin out?"

"Cut it?" Carter drew his sword, but Amos held up his hand.

"No, children. That's not the business I mean. I've made sure no one will interrupt us. Now it's time we talked."

A cold tingle started up my spine. "Talked?"

Suddenly Amos fell to his knees and began to convulse. I ran towards him, but he looked up at me, his face racked with pain. His eyes were molten red.

"Run!" he groaned.

He collapsed, and red steam issued from his body.

"We have to go!" Zia grabbed my arm. *"Now!"*

But I watched, frozen in horror, as the steam rose from Amos's unconscious form and drifted towards the throne, slowly taking the shape of a seated man—a red warrior in fiery armor, with an iron staff in his hand and the head of a canine monster.

"Oh, dear," Set laughed. "I suppose Zia gets to say 'I told you so.'"

37. Leroy Gets His Revenge

MAYBE I'M A SLOW LEARNER, OKAY?

Because it wasn't until that moment, facing the god Set in the middle of his throne room, in the heart of an evil pyramid, with an army of demons outside and the world about to explode, that I thought, *Coming here was a really* bad *idea.*

Set rose from his throne. He was red skinned and muscular, with fiery armor and a black iron staff. His head shifted from bestial to human. One moment he had the hungry stare and slavering jaws of my old friend Leroy, the monster from the D.C. airport. The next he had sandy hair and a handsome but harsh face, with intelligent eyes that sparkled with humor and a cruel, crooked smile. He kicked our uncle out of the way and Amos groaned, which at least meant he was alive.

I was clenching my sword so tight, the blade trembled.

"Zia was right," I said. "You possessed Amos."

Set spread his hands, trying to look modest. "Well, you know… It wasn't a *full* possession. Gods can exist in many places at once, Carter. Horus could tell you that if he was being honest. I'm sure Horus has been looking for a nice war monument to occupy, or a military academy somewhere—anything but that scrawny little form of yours. Most of my being has now transferred to this magnificent structure."

He swept his arm proudly around the throne room. "But a sliver of my soul was quite enough to control Amos Kane."

He held out his pinky, and a wisp of red smoke snaked toward Amos, sinking into his clothes. Amos arched his back like he'd been hit by lightning.

"Stop it!" I yelled.

I ran toward Amos, but the red mist had already dissipated. Our uncle's body went slack.

Set dropped his hand as if bored with the attack. "Not much left, I'm afraid. Amos fought well. He was very entertaining, demanding much more of my energy than I had anticipated. That chaos magic—that was *his* idea. He tried his best to warn you, to make it obvious I was controlling him. The funny thing is, I forced him to use his own magic reserves to pull off those spells. He almost burned out his soul trying to send you those warning flares. Turn you into a storm? Please. Who does that anymore?"

"You're a beast!" Sadie shouted.

Set gasped in mock surprise. "Really? Me?"

Then he roared with laughter as Sadie tried to drag Amos out of harm's way.

"Amos was in London that night," I said, hoping to keep his attention on me. "He must've followed us to the British Museum, and you've been controlling him ever since. Desjardins was

never your host."

"Oh, that commoner? Please," Set sneered. "We always prefer blood of the pharaohs, as I'm sure you've heard. But I did love fooling you. I thought the *bon soir* was an especially nice touch."

"You knew my *ba* was there, watching. You forced Amos to sabotage his own house so your monsters could get in. You made him walk into an ambush. Why didn't you just have him kidnap us?"

Set spread his hands. "As I said, Amos put up a good fight. There were certain things I could not make him do without destroying him completely, and I didn't want to ruin my new plaything quite so soon."

Anger burned inside me. Amos's odd behavior finally made sense. Yes, he had been controlled by Set, but he'd been fighting it all the way. The conflict I'd felt in him had been his attempts to warn us. He'd almost destroyed himself trying to save us, and Set had thrown him aside like a broken toy.

Give me control, Horus urged. *We will avenge him.*

I've got this, I said.

No! Horus said. *You must let me. You are not ready.*

Set laughed as if he could sense our struggle. "Oh, poor Horus. Your host needs training wheels. You seriously expect to challenge me with *that*?"

For the first time, Horus and I had the same feeling at exactly the same moment: *rage.*

Without thinking, we raised our hand, extending our energy toward Set. A glowing fist slammed into him, and the Red God flew backward with such force, he cracked a column, which tumbled down on top of him.

For a heartbeat, the only sound was the trickle of dust and debris. Then out of the rubble came a deep howl of laughter. Set rose from the ruins, tossing aside a huge chunk of stone.

"Nice!" he roared. "Completely ineffective, but nice! It will be a pleasure chopping you to bits, Horus, as I did your father before you. I will entomb you all in this chamber to increase my storm—all four of my precious siblings, and the storm will be large enough to envelop the world!"

I blinked, momentarily losing my focus. "Four?"

"Oh, yes." Set's eyes drifted to Zia, who had quietly retreated to one side of the room. "I haven't forgotten you, my dear."

Zia glanced at me in desperation. "Carter, don't worry about me. He's trying to distract you."

"Lovely goddess," Set purred. "The form does not do you justice, but your choices were limited, weren't they?"

Set moved toward her, his staff beginning to glow.

"No!" I shouted. I advanced, but Set was just as good at magical shoving as I was. He pointed at me, and I slammed against the wall, pinned as if an entire football team were holding me down.

"Carter!" Sadie cried. "She's Nephthys. She can take care of herself!"

"No." All my instincts told me Zia couldn't be Nephthys. At first I'd thought so, but the more I considered, the more it seemed wrong. I felt no divine magic from her, and something told me I would have if she were really hosting a goddess.

Set would crush her unless I helped. But if Set was trying to distract me, it was working. As he stalked toward Zia, I struggled against his magic, but I couldn't free myself. The more I tried to

combine my power with Horus's, the way I'd done before, the more my fear and panic got in the way.

You must yield to me! Horus insisted, and the two of us wrestled for control of my mind, which gave me a splitting headache.

Set took another step toward Zia.

"Ah, Nephthys," he crooned. "At the beginning of time, you were my treacherous sister. In another incarnation, in another age, you were my treacherous wife. Now, I think you'll make a nice appetizer. True, you're the weakest of us all, but you're still one of the five, and there *is* power in collecting the complete set."

He paused, then grinned. "The complete Set! That's funny! Now let's consume your energy and entomb your soul, shall we?"

Zia thrust out her wand. A red sphere of defensive energy glowed around her, but even I could tell it was weak. Set shot a blast of sand from his staff and the sphere collapsed. Zia stumbled backward, the sand ripping at her hair and clothes. I struggled to move, but Zia yelled, "Carter, I'm not important! Stay focused! Don't resist!"

She raised her staff and shouted, "The House of Life!"

She launched a bolt of fire at Set—an attack that must have cost all of her remaining energy. Set batted the flames aside, straight at Sadie, who had to raise her wand quickly to protect herself and Amos from getting fried. Set tugged at the air as if pulling an invisible rope, and Zia flew toward him like a rag doll, straight into his hand.

Don't resist. How could Zia say that? I resisted like crazy, but it didn't do me any good. All I could do was stare helplessly as Set lowered his face to Zia's and examined her.

At first Set seemed triumphant, gleeful, but his expression quickly turned to confusion. He scowled, his eyes flaring.

"What trick is this?" he growled. "Where have you hidden her?"

"You will not possess her," Zia managed, her breath choked off by his grip.

"Where *is* she?" He threw Zia aside.

She slammed against the wall and would've slid into the moat, but Sadie yelled "Wind!" and a gust of air lifted Zia's body just enough for her to tumble onto the floor.

Sadie ran over and dragged her away from the glowing trench.

Set roared, "Is this your trickery, Isis?" He sent another blast of sandstorm against them, but Sadie held up her wand. The storm met a shield of force that deflected the wind around it—the sand pitted the walls behind Sadie, making a halo-shaped scar in the rock.

I didn't understand what Set was so angry about, but I couldn't allow him to hurt Sadie.

Seeing her alone, protecting Zia from the wrath of a god, something inside me clicked, like an engine shifting into higher gear. My thinking suddenly became faster and clearer. The anger and fear didn't go away, but I realized they weren't important. They weren't going to help me save my sister.

Don't resist, Zia had told me.

She didn't mean resisting Set. She meant Horus. The falcon god and I had been wrestling with each other for days as he tried to take control of my body.

But *neither* of us could be in control. That was the answer. We had to act in unison, trust each other completely, or we were both dead.

Yes, Horus thought, and he stopped pushing. I stopped resisting, letting our thoughts flow together. I understood his power, his memories, and his fears. I saw every host he had ever been over a thousand lifetimes. And he saw my mind—everything, even the stuff I wasn't proud of.

It's hard to describe the feeling. And I knew from Horus's memory that this kind of union was *very* rare—like the one time when the coin doesn't land heads *or* tails, but stands on its edge, perfectly balanced. He did not control me. I did not use him for power. We acted as one.

Our voices spoke in harmony: "Now."

And the magic bonds that held us shattered.

My combat avatar formed around me, lifting me off the floor and encasing me with golden energy. I stepped forward and raised my sword. The falcon warrior mimicked the movement, perfectly attuned to my wishes.

Set turned and regarded me with cold eyes.

"So, Horus," he said. "You managed to find the pedals of your little bike, eh? That does not mean you can ride."

"I am Carter Kane," I said. "Blood of the Pharaohs, Eye of Horus. And now, Set—brother, uncle, traitor—I'm going to crush you like a gnat."

38. The House Is in the House

IT WAS A FIGHT TO THE DEATH, and I felt great.

Every move was perfect. Every strike was so much fun I wanted to laugh out loud. Set grew in size until he was larger than me, and his iron staff the size of a boat's mast. His face would flicker, sometimes human, sometimes the feral maw of the Set animal.

We clashed sword against staff and sparks flew. He pushed me off balance, and I smashed into one of his animal statues, which toppled to the floor and broke. I regained my balance and charged, my blade biting into a chink of Set's shoulder guard. He howled as black blood seeped from the wound.

He swung his staff, and I rolled before the strike could split my head. His staff cracked the floor instead. We fought back and forth, smashing pillars and walls, with chunks of the ceiling falling around us, until I realized Sadie was yelling to get my attention.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her trying to shield Zia and Amos from the destruction. She'd drawn a hasty protective circle on the floor, and her shields were deflecting the falling debris, but I understood why she was worried: much more of this, and the entire throne room would collapse, crushing all of us. I doubted it would hurt Set much. He was probably counting on that. He *wanted* to entomb us here.

I had to get him into the open. Maybe if I gave Sadie time, she could free Dad's coffin from that throne.

Then I remembered how Bast had described her fight with Apophis: grappling with the enemy for eternity.

Yes, Horus agreed.

I raised my fist and channeled a burst of energy toward the air vent above us, blasting it open until red light once again poured through. Then I dropped my sword and launched myself at Set. I grabbed his shoulders with my bare hands, trying to get him in a wrestler's hold. He attempted to pummel me, but his staff was useless at close range. He growled and dropped the weapon, then grabbed my arms. He was much stronger than I was, but Horus knew some good moves. I twisted and got behind Set, my forearm slipping under his arm and grabbing his neck in a vise. We stumbled forward, almost stepping on Sadie's protective shields.

Now we've got him, I thought. *What do we do with him?*

Ironically, it was Amos who gave me the answer. I remembered how he'd turned me into a storm, overcoming my sense of self by sheer mental force. Our minds had had a brief battle, but he had imposed his will with absolute confidence, imagining me as a storm cloud, and that's what I'd become.

You're a fruit bat, I told Set.

No! his mind yelled, but I had surprised him. I could feel his confusion, and I used it against him. It was easy to imagine him as a bat, since I'd seen Amos become one when he was possessed by Set. I pictured my enemy shrinking, growing leathery wings and an even uglier face. I shrank too, until I was a falcon with a fruit bat in my claws. No time to waste; I shot toward the air vent, wrestling with the bat as we spun in circles up the shaft, slashing and biting. Finally we burst into the open, reverting to our warrior forms on the side of the red pyramid.

I stood uneasily on the slope. My avatar shimmered with damage along the right arm, and my own arm was cut and bleeding in the same spot. Set rose, wiping black blood from his mouth.

He grinned at me, and his face flickered with the snarl of a predator. "You can die knowing you made a good effort, Horus. But it's much too late. Look."

I gazed out over the cavern, and my heart crawled into my throat. The army of demons had engaged a new enemy in battle. Magicians—dozens of them—had appeared in a loose circle around the pyramid and were fighting their way forward. The House of Life must have gathered all its available forces, but they were pathetically few against Set's legions. Each magician stood inside a moving protective circle, like a spotlight beam, wading through the enemy with staff and wand glowing. Flames, lightning, and tornadoes ripped through the demon host. I spotted all kinds of summoned beasts—lions, serpents, sphinxes, and even some hippos charging through the enemy like tanks. Here and there, hieroglyphs glowed in the air, causing explosions and earthquakes that destroyed Set's forces. But more demons just kept coming, surrounding the magicians in deeper and deeper ranks. I watched as one magician was completely overwhelmed, his circle broken in a flash of green light, and he went down under the enemy wave.

"This is the end of the House," Set said with satisfaction. "They cannot prevail as long as my pyramid stands."

The magicians seemed to know this. As they got closer, they sent fiery comets and bolts of lightning toward the pyramid; but each blast dissipated harmlessly against its stone slopes, consumed in the red haze of Set's power.

Then I spotted the golden capstone. Four snake-headed giants had retrieved it and were carrying it slowly but steadily through the melee. Set's lieutenant Face of Horror shouted orders to them, lashing them with a whip to keep them moving. They pressed forward until they reached the pyramid's base and began to climb.

I charged toward them, but Set intervened in an instant, placing himself in my path.

"I don't think so, Horus," he laughed. "You won't ruin this party."

We both summoned our weapons to our hands and fought with renewed ferocity, slicing and dodging. I brought my sword down in a deadly arc, but Set ducked aside and my blade hit stone, sending a shock wave through my whole body. Before I could recover, Set spoke a word: *"Ha-wi!"*

Strike.

The hieroglyphs exploded in my face and sent me tumbling down the side of the pyramid.

When my vision cleared, I saw Face of Horror and the snake-headed giants far above me,

lugging their golden load up the side of the monument, only a few steps from the top.

"No," I muttered. I tried to rise, but my avatar form was sluggish.

Then out of nowhere a magician catapulted into the midst of the demons and unleashed a gale of wind. Demons went flying, dropping the capstone, and the magician struck it with his staff, stopping it from sliding. The magician was Desjardins. His forked beard and robes and leopard-skin cape were singed with fire, and his eyes were full of rage. He pressed his staff against the capstone, and its golden shape began to glow; but before Desjardins could destroy it, Set rose up behind him and swung his iron rod like a baseball bat.

Desjardins tumbled, broken and unconscious, all the way down the pyramid, disappearing into the mob of demons. My heart twisted. I'd never liked Desjardins, but no one deserved a fate like that.

"Annoying," Set said. "But not effective. This is what the House of Life has reduced itself to, eh, Horus?"

I charged up the slope, and again our weapons clanged together. We fought back and forth as gray light began to seep through the cracks in the mountain above us.

Horus's keen senses told me we had about two minutes until sunrise, maybe less.

Horus's energy kept surging through me. My avatar was only mildly damaged, my attacks still swift and strong. But it wasn't enough to defeat Set, and Set knew it. He was in no hurry. With every minute, another magician went down on the battlefield, and chaos got closer to winning.

Patience, Horus urged. *We fought him for seven years the first time.*

But I knew we didn't have seven minutes, much less seven years. I wished Sadie were here, but I could only hope she'd managed to free Dad and keep Zia and Amos safe.

That thought distracted me. Set swept his staff at my feet, and instead of jumping, I tried to back up. The blow cracked against my right ankle, knocking me off balance and sending me somersaulting down the pyramid's side.

Set laughed. "Have a nice trip!" Then he picked up the capstone.

I rose, groaning, but my feet were like lead. I staggered up the slope, but before I'd closed even half the distance, Set placed the capstone and completed the structure. Red light flowed down the sides of the pyramid with a sound like the world's largest bass guitar, shaking the entire mountain and making my whole body go numb.

"Thirty seconds to sunrise!" Set yelled with glee. "And this land will be mine forever. You can't stop me alone, Horus—especially not in the desert, the source of my strength!"

"You're right," said a nearby voice.

I glanced over and saw Sadie rising from the air vent—radiant with multicolored light, her staff and wand glowing.

"Except Horus is *not* alone," she said. "And we're *not* going to fight you in the desert."

She struck her staff against the pyramid and shouted a name: the last words I'd ever expect her to utter as a battle cry.

SADIE

39. Zia Tells Me a Secret

CHEERS, CARTER, FOR MAKING ME LOOK dramatic and all that.

The truth was a bit less glamorous.

Back up, shall we? When my brother, the crazy chicken warrior, turned into a falcon and went up the pyramid's chimney with his new friend, the fruit bat, he left me playing nurse to two very wounded people—which I didn't appreciate, and which I wasn't particularly good at.

Poor Amos's wounds seemed more magical than physical. He didn't have a mark on him, but his eyes were rolled up in his head, and he was barely breathing. Steam curled from his skin when I touched his forehead, so I decided I'd best leave him for the moment.

Zia was another story. Her face was deathly pale, and she was bleeding from several nasty cuts on her leg. One of her arms was twisted at a bad angle. Her breath rattled with a sound like wet sand.

"Hold still." I ripped some cloth from the hem of my pants and tried to bind her leg. "Maybe there's some healing magic or—"

"Sadie." She gripped my wrist feebly. "No time. Listen."

"If we can stop the bleeding—"

"His name. You need his name."

"But you're not Nephthys! Set said so."

She shook her head. "A message…I speak with her voice. The name—Evil Day. Set was born, and it was an *Evil Day*."

True enough, I thought, but could that really be Set's secret name? What Zia was talking about, not being Nephthys but speaking with her voice—it made no sense. Then I remembered the voice at the river. Nephthys had said she would send a message. And Anubis had made me promise I would listen to Nephthys.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Look, Zia—"

Then the truth hit me in face. Some things Iskandar had said, some things Thoth had said—they all clicked together. Iskandar had wanted to protect Zia. He'd told me if he'd realized Carter and I were godlings sooner, he could've protected us as well as…someone. As well as *Zia.* Now I understood how he'd tried to protect her.

"Oh, god." I stared at her. "That's it, isn't it?"

She seemed to understand, and she nodded. Her face contorted with pain, but her eyes remained as fierce and insistent as ever. "Use the name. Bend Set to your will. Make him help."

"*Help?* He just tried to kill you, Zia. He's not the *helping* type."

"Go." She tried to push me away. Flames sputtered weakly from her fingers. "Carter needs you."

That was the one thing she might've said to spur me on. Carter was in trouble.

"I'll be back, then," I promised. "Don't…*um,* go anywhere."

I stood and stared at the hole in the ceiling, dreading the idea of turning into a kite again. Then my eyes fixed on Dad's coffin, buried in the red throne. The sarcophagus was glowing like something radioactive, heading for meltdown. If I could only break the throne…

Set must be dealt with first, Isis warned.

But if I can free Dad…I stepped towards the throne.

No, Isis warned. *What you might see is too dangerous.*

What are you talking about? I thought irritably. I put my hand on the golden coffin. Instantly I was ripped from the throne room and into a vision.

I was back in the Land of the Dead, in the Hall of Judgment. The crumbling monuments of a New Orleans graveyard shimmered around me. Spirits of the dead stirred restlessly in the mist. At the base of the broken scales, a tiny monster slept—Ammit the Devourer. He opened one glowing yellow eye to study me, then went back to sleep.

Anubis stepped out of the shadows. He was dressed in a black silk suit with his tie unknotted, like he'd just come back from a funeral or possibly a convention for really gorgeous undertakers. "Sadie, you shouldn't be here."

"Tell me about it," I said, but I was so glad to see him, I wanted to sob with relief.

He took my hand and led me towards the empty black throne. "We have lost all balance. The throne cannot be empty. The restoration of Ma'at must begin here, in this hall."

He sounded sad, as if he were asking me to accept something terrible. I didn't understand, but a profound sense of loss crept over me.

"It's not fair," I said.

"No, it's not." He squeezed my hand. "I'll be here, waiting. I'm sorry, Sadie. I truly am…"

He started to fade.

"Wait!" I tried to hold on to his hand, but he melted into mist along with the graveyard.

I found myself back in the throne room of the gods, except it looked like it had been abandoned for centuries. The roof had fallen in, along with half of the columns. The braziers were cold and rusty. The beautiful marble floor was as cracked as a dry lakebed.

Bast stood alone next to the empty throne of Osiris. She gave me a mischievous smile, but seeing her again was almost too painful to bear.

"Oh, don't be sad," she chided. "Cats don't do regret."

"But aren't you—aren't you dead?"

"That all depends." She gestured around her. "The Duat is in turmoil. The gods have gone too long without a king. If Set doesn't take over, someone else must. The enemy is coming. Don't let me die in vain."

"But will you come back?" I asked, my voice breaking. "Please, I never even got to say good-bye to you. I can't—"

"Good luck, Sadie. Keep your claws sharp." Bast vanished, and the scenery changed again.

I stood in the Hall of Ages, in the First Nome—another empty throne—and Iskandar sat at its feet, waiting for a pharaoh who hadn't existed for two thousand years.

"A leader, my dear," he said. "Ma'at demands a leader."

"It's too much," I said. "Too many thrones. You can't expect Carter—"

"Not alone," Iskandar agreed. "But this is your family's burden. You started the process. The Kanes alone will heal us or destroy us."

"I don't know what you mean!"

Iskandar opened his hand, and in a flash of light, the scene changed one more time.

I was back at the Thames. It must've been the dead of the night, three o'clock in the morning, because the Embankment was empty. Mist obscured the lights of the city, and the air was wintry.

Two people, a man and a woman, stood bundled against the cold, holding hands in front of Cleopatra's Needle. At first I thought they were a random couple on a date. Then, with a shock, I realized I was looking at my parents.

My dad lifted his face and scowled at the obelisk. In the dim glow of the streetlamps, his features looked like chiseled marble—like the pharaoh statues he loved to study. He *did* have the face of a king, I thought—proud and handsome.

"You're sure?" he asked my mother. "Absolutely sure?"

Mum brushed her blond hair out of her face. She was even more beautiful than her pictures, but she looked worried—eyebrows furrowed, lips pressed together. Like *me* when I was upset, when I looked in the mirror and tried to convince myself things weren't so bad. I wanted to call to her, to let her know I was there, but my voice wouldn't work.

"She told me this is where it begins," my mother said. She pulled her black coat around her, and I caught a glimpse of her necklace—the amulet of Isis, *my* amulet. I stared at it, stunned, but then she pulled her collar closed, and the amulet disappeared. "If we want to defeat the enemy, we must start with the obelisk. We must find out the truth."

My father frowned uneasily. He'd drawn a protective circle around them—blue chalk lines on the pavement. When he touched the base of the obelisk, the circle began to glow.

"I don't like it," he said. "Won't you call on her help?"

"No," my mother insisted. "I know my limits, Julius. If I tried it again…"

My heart skipped a beat. Iskandar's words came back to me: *She saw things that made her seek advice from unconventional places.* I recognized the look in my mother's eyes, and I knew: my mother had communed with Isis.

Why didn't you tell me? I wanted to scream.

My father summoned his staff and wand. "Ruby, if we fail—"

"We can't fail," she insisted. "The world depends on it."

They kissed one last time, as if they sensed they were saying good-bye. Then they raised their staffs and wands and began to chant. Cleopatra's Needle glowed with power.

I yanked my hand away from the sarcophagus. My eyes stung with tears.

You knew my mother, I shouted at Isis. *You encouraged her to open that obelisk. You got her*

killed!

I waited for her to answer. Instead, a ghostly image appeared in front of me—a projection of my father, shimmering in the light of the golden coffin.

"Sadie." He smiled. His voice sounded tinny and hollow, the way it used to on the phone when he'd call me from far away—from Egypt or Australia or god knows where. "Don't blame Isis for your mother's fate. None of us understood exactly what would happen. Even your mother could only see bits and pieces of the future. But when the time came, your mother accepted her role. It was her decision."

"To *die?*" I demanded. "Isis should've helped her. *You* should've helped her. I *hate* you!"

As soon as I said it, something broke inside me. I started to cry. I realized I'd wanted to say that to my dad for years. I blamed him for Mum's death, blamed him for leaving me. But now that I'd said it, all the anger drained out me, leaving me nothing but guilt.

"I'm sorry," I sputtered. "I didn't—"

"Don't apologize, my brave girl. You have every right to feel that way. You had to get it out. What you're about to do—you have to believe it's for the right reasons, not because you resent me."

"I don't know what you mean."

He reached out to brush a tear from my cheek, but his hand was just a shimmer of light. "Your mother was the first in many centuries to commune with Isis. It was dangerous, against the teachings of the House, but your mother was a diviner. She had a premonition that chaos was rising. The House was failing. We *needed* the gods. Isis could not cross the Duat. She could barely manage a whisper, but she told us what she could about their imprisonment. She counseled Ruby on what must be done. The gods could rise again, she said, but it would take many *hard* sacrifices. We thought the obelisk would release all the gods, but that was only the beginning."

"Isis could've given Mum more power. Or at least Bast! Bast *offered—"*

"No, Sadie. Your mother knew her limits. If she had tried to host a god, *fully* use divine power, she would have been consumed or worse. She freed Bast, and used her own power to seal the breach. With her life, she bought you some time."

"Me? But…"

"You and your brother have the strongest blood of any Kane in three thousand years. Your mother studied the lineage of the pharaohs—she knew this to be true. You have the best chance at relearning the old ways, and healing the breach between magicians and gods. Your mother began the stirring. I unleashed the gods from the Rosetta Stone. But it will be your job to restore Ma'at."

"You can help," I insisted. "Once we free you."

"Sadie," he said forlornly, "when you become a parent, you may understand this. One of my hardest jobs as a father, one of my greatest duties, was to realize that my own dreams, my own goals and wishes, are secondary to my children's. Your mother and I have set the stage. But it is *your* stage. This pyramid is designed to feed chaos. It consumes the power of other gods and makes Set stronger."

"I know. If I break the throne, maybe open the coffin…"

"You might save me," Dad conceded. "But the power of Osiris, the power inside me, would be consumed by the pyramid. It would only hasten the destruction and make Set stronger. The pyramid must be destroyed, *all* of it. And you know how that must be done."

I was about to protest that I *didn't* know, but the feather of truth kept me honest. The way was inside me—I'd seen it in Isis's thoughts. I'd known what was coming ever since Anubis asked me that impossible question: "To save the world, would you sacrifice your father?"

"I don't want to," I said. "Please."

"Osiris must take his throne," my father said. "Through death, life. It is the only way. May Ma'at guide you, Sadie. I love you."

And with that, his image dissipated.

Someone was calling my name.

I looked back and saw Zia trying to sit up, clutching weakly at her wand. "Sadie, what are you doing?"

All around us, the room was shaking. Cracks split the walls, as if a giant were using the pyramid as a punching bag.

How long had I been in a trance? I wasn't sure, but I was out of time.

I closed my eyes and concentrated. The voice of Isis spoke almost immediately: *Do you see now? Do you understand why I could not say more?*

Anger built inside me, but I forced it down. *We'll talk about that later. Right now, we have a god to defeat.*

I pictured myself stepping forward, merging with the soul of the goddess.

I'd shared power with Isis before, but this was different. My resolve, my anger, even my grief gave me confidence. I looked Isis straight in the eye (spiritually speaking), and we understood one another.

I saw her entire history—her early days grasping for power, using tricks and schemes to find the name of Ra. I saw her wedding with Osiris, her hopes and dreams for a new empire. Then I saw those dreams shattered by Set. I felt her anger and bitterness, her fierce pride and protectiveness for her young son, Horus. And I saw the pattern of her life repeating itself over and over again through the ages, through a thousand different hosts.

Gods have great power, Iskandar had said. *But only humans have creativity, the power to change history.*

I also felt my mother's thoughts, like an imprint on the goddess's memory: Ruby's final moments and the choice she'd made. She'd given her life to start a chain of events. And the next move was mine.

"Sadie!" Zia called again, her voice weakening.

"I'm fine," I said. "I'm going now."

Zia studied my face, and obviously didn't like what she saw. "You're not fine. You've been badly shaken. Fighting Set in your condition would be suicide."

"Don't worry," I said. "We have a plan."

With that, I turned into a kite and flew up the airshaft towards the top of the pyramid.

SADIE

40. I Ruin a Rather Important Spell

I FOUND THAT THINGS WEREN'T GOING WELL UPSTAIRS.

Carter was a crumpled heap of chicken warrior on the slope of the pyramid. Set had just placed the capstone and was shouting, "Thirty seconds to sunrise!" In the cavern below, magicians from the House of Life waded through an army of demons, fighting a hopeless fight.

The scene would've been frightening enough, but now I saw it as Isis did. Like a crocodile with eyes at water level—seeing both below and above the surface—I saw the Duat entwined with the regular world. The demons had fiery souls in the Duat that made them look like an army of birthday candles. Where Carter stood in the mortal world, a falcon warrior stood in the Duat—not an avatar, but the real thing, with feathered head, sharp bloodstained beak, and gleaming black eyes. His sword rippled with golden light. As for Set—imagine a mountain of sand, doused with petrol, set on fire, spinning in the world's largest blender. That's what he looked like in the Duat—a column of destructive force so powerful that the stones at his feet bubbled and blistered.

I'm not sure what I looked like, but I felt powerful. The force of Ma'at coursed through me; the Divine Words were at my command. I was Sadie Kane, blood of the pharaohs. And I was Isis, goddess of magic, holder of the secret names.

As Carter struggled his way up the pyramid, Set gloated: "You can't stop me by yourself, Horus—especially not in the desert, the source of my strength!"

"You're right!" I called.

Set turned, and the look on his face was priceless. I raised my staff and wand, gathering my magic.

"Except that Horus is *not* alone," I said. "And we're *not* going to fight you in the desert."

I slammed my staff against the stones and shouted, "Washington, D.C.!"

The pyramid shook. For a moment, nothing else happened.

Set seemed to realize what I was doing. He let out a nervous laugh. "Magic one-oh-one, Sadie Kane. You can't open a portal during the Demon Days!"

"A mortal can't," I agreed. "But a goddess of magic can."

Above us, the air crackled with lightning. The top of the cavern dissolved into a churning vortex of sand as large as the pyramid.

Demons stopped fighting and looked up in horror. Magicians stammered midspell, their faces slack with awe.

The vortex was so powerful that it ripped blocks off the pyramid and sucked them into the sand.

And then, like a giant lid, the portal began to descend.

"No!" Set roared. He blasted the portal with flames, then turned on me and hurled stones and lightning, but it was too late. The portal swallowed us all.

The world seemed to flip upside down. For a heartbeat, I wondered if I'd made a terrible miscalculation—if Set's pyramid would explode in the portal, and I'd spend eternity floating through the Duat as a billion little particles of Sadie sand. Then, with a sonic boom, we appeared in the cold morning air with a brilliant blue sky above us. Spread out below us were the snow-covered fields of the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

The red pyramid was still intact, but cracks had appeared on its surface. The gold capstone glowed, trying to maintain its magic, but we weren't in Phoenix anymore. The pyramid had been ripped from its source of power, the desert, and in front us loomed the default gateway for North America, the tall white obelisk that was the most powerful focal point of Ma'at on the continent: the Washington Monument.

Set screamed something at me in Ancient Egyptian. I was fairly sure it wasn't a compliment.

"I will rend your limbs from their sockets!" he shouted. "I will—"

"Die?" Carter suggested. He rose behind Set and swung his sword. The blade cut into Set's armor at the ribs—not a killing blow, but enough to knock the Red God off balance and send him tumbling down the side of his pyramid. Carter bounded after him, and in the Duat I could see arcs of white energy pulsing from the Washington Monument to the Horus avatar, charging it with new power.

"The book, Sadie!" Carter shouted as he ran. "Do it now!"

I must've been dazed from summoning the portal, because Set understood what Carter was saying a lot faster than I did.

"No!" the Red God shouted. He charged towards me, but Carter intercepted him halfway up the slope.

He grappled with Set, holding him back. The stones of the pyramid cracked and crumbled under the weight of their godly forms. All around the base of the pyramid, demons and magicians who'd been pulled through the portal and knocked momentarily unconscious were starting to stir.

The book, Sadie… Sometimes it's helpful to have someone other than yourself inside your head, because one can slap the other. *Duh, the book!*

I held out my hand and summoned the little blue tome we'd stolen from Paris: *The Book of Overcoming Set*. I unfolded the papyrus; the hieroglyphs were as clear as a nursery school primer. I called for the feather of truth, and instantly it appeared, glowing above the pages.

I began the spell, speaking the Divine Words, and my body rose into the air, hovering a few centimeters above the pyramid. I chanted the story of creation: the first mountain rising above the waters of chaos, the birth of the gods Ra, Geb, and Nut, the rise of Ma'at, and the first great empire of men, Egypt.

The Washington Monument began to glow as hieroglyphs appeared along its sides. The capstone gleamed silver.

Set tried to lash out at me, but Carter intercepted him. And the red pyramid began to break apart.

I thought about Amos and Zia, trapped inside under tons of stone, and I almost faltered, but my mother's voice spoke in my mind: *Stay focused, dearest. Watch for your enemy*.

Yes, Isis said. *Destroy him*!

But somehow I knew that wasn't what my mother meant. She was telling me to watch. Something important was about to happen.

Through the Duat, I saw magic forming around me, weaving a white sheen over the world, reinforcing Ma'at and expelling chaos. Carter and Set wrestled back and forth as huge chunks of the pyramid collapsed.

The feather of truth glowed, shining like a spotlight on the Red God. As I neared the end of the spell, my words began tearing Set's form to shreds.

In the Duat, his fiery whirlwind was being stripped away, revealing a black-skinned, slimy thing like an emaciated Set animal—the evil essence of the god. But in the mortal world, occupying the same space, there stood a proud warrior in red armor, blazing with power and determined to fight to the death.

"I name you Set," I chanted. "I name you Evil Day."

With a thunderous roar, the pyramid imploded. Set fell crashing into the ruins. He tried to rise, but Carter swung his sword. Set barely had time to raise his staff. Their weapons crossed, and Horus slowly forced Set to one knee.

"Now, Sadie!" Carter yelled.

"You have been my enemy," I chanted, "and a curse on the land."

A line of white light shot down the length of the Washington Monument. It widened into a rift—a doorway between this world and the brilliant white abyss that would lock Set away, trapping his life force. Maybe not forever, but for a long, long time.

To complete the spell, I only had to speak one more line: "Deserving no mercy, an enemy of Ma'at, you are exiled beyond the earth."

The line had to be spoken with absolute conviction. The feather of truth required it. And why shouldn't I believe it? It was the truth. Set deserved no mercy. He *was* an enemy of Ma'at.

But I hesitated.

"Watch for your enemy," my mother had said.

I looked towards the top of the monument, and in the Duat I saw chunks of pyramid flying skyward and the souls of demons lifting off like fireworks. As Set's chaos magic dispersed, all the force that had been charging up, ready to destroy a continent, was being sucked into the clouds. And as I watched, the chaos tried to form a shape. It was like a red reflection of the Potomac—an enormous crimson river at least a mile long and a hundred meters wide. It writhed in the air, trying to become solid, and I felt its rage and bitterness. This was not what it had wanted. There was not enough power or chaos for its purpose. To form properly, it needed the death of millions, the wasting of an entire continent.

It was not a river. It was a snake.

"Sadie!" Carter yelled. "What are you waiting for?"

He couldn't see it, I realized. No one could but me.

Set was on his knees, writhing and cursing as white energy encircled him, pulling him towards the rift. "Lost your stomach, witch?" he bellowed. Then he glared at Carter. "You see, Horus? Isis was always a coward. She could never complete the deed!"

Carter looked at me, and for a moment I saw the doubt on his face. Horus would be urging him towards bloody vengeance. I was hesitating. This is what had turned Isis and Horus against each other before. I couldn't let it happen now.

But more than that, in Carter's wary expression I saw the way he used to look at me on our visiting days—when we were practically strangers, forced to spend time together, pretending we were a happy family because Dad expected it of us. I didn't want to go back to that. I wasn't pretending anymore. We *were* a family, and we had to work together.

"Carter, look." I threw the feather of truth into the sky, breaking the spell.

"No!" Carter screamed.

But the feather exploded into silver dust that clung to the form of the serpent, forcing it to become visible, just for an instant.

Carter's mouth fell open as the serpent writhed in the air above Washington, slowly losing power.

Next to me, a voice screamed: "Wretched gods!"

I turned to see Set's minion, Face of Horror, with his fangs bared and his grotesque face only inches from mine, a jagged knife raised above my head. I only had time to think: *I'm dead,* before a flash of metal registered in the corner of my eye. There was a sickening thud, and the demon froze.

Carter had thrown his sword with deadly accuracy. The demon dropped his knife, fell to his knees, and stared down at the blade that was now sheathed in his side.

He crumpled to his back, exhaling with an angry hiss. His black eyes fixed on me, and he spoke in a completely different voice—a rasping, dry sound, like a reptile's belly scraping over sand. "This is not over, godling. All this I have wrought with a wisp of my voice, the merest bit of my essence wriggling from my weakened cage. Imagine what I shall do when fully formed."

He gave me a ghastly smile, and then his face went slack. A tiny line of red mist curled from his mouth—like a worm or a fresh-hatched snake—and writhed upward into the sky to join its source. The demon's body disintegrated into sand.

I looked up once more at the giant red serpent slowly dissolving in the sky. Then I summoned a good strong wind and dispersed it completely.

The Washington Monument stopped glowing. The rift closed, and the little spellbook disappeared from my hand.

I moved towards Set, who was still ensnared in ropes of white energy. I'd spoken his true name. He wasn't going anywhere just yet.

"You both saw the serpent in the clouds," I said. "Apophis."

Carter nodded, stunned. "He was trying to break into the mortal world, using the Red Pyramid as a gateway. If its power had been unleashed…" He looked down in revulsion at the pile of sand that had once been a demon. "Set's lieutenant—Face of Horror—he was possessed by Apophis all along, using Set to get what he wanted."

"Ridiculous!" Set glared at me and struggled against his bonds. "The snake in the clouds was one of your tricks, Isis. An illusion."

"You know it wasn't," I said. "I could've sent you into the abyss, Set, but you saw the real enemy. Apophis was trying to break out of his prison in the Duat. His voice possessed Face of

Horror. He was using you."

"No one uses me!"

Carter let his warrior form disperse. He floated to the ground and summoned his sword back to his hand. "Apophis wanted your explosion to feed *his* power, Set. As soon as he came through the Duat and found us dead, I'm betting *you* would've been his first meal. Chaos would've won."

"I *am* chaos!" Set insisted.

"Partially," I said. "But you're still one of the gods. True, you're evil, faithless, ruthless, vile—"

"You make me blush, sister."

"But you're also the strongest god. In the ancient times, you were Ra's faithful lieutenant, defending his boat against Apophis. Ra couldn't have defeated the Serpent without you."

"I am pretty great," Set admitted. "But Ra is gone forever, thanks to you."

"Maybe not forever," I said. "We'll have to find him. Apophis is rising, which means we'll need all the gods to battle him. Even you."

Set tested his bonds of white energy. When he found he couldn't break them, he gave me a crooked smile. "You suggest an alliance? You'd trust me?"

Carter laughed. "You've got to be kidding. But we've got your number, now. Your secret name. Right, Sadie?"

I closed my fingers, and the bonds tightened around Set. He cried out in pain. It took a great deal of energy, and I knew I couldn't hold him like this for long, but there was no point telling that to Set.

"The House of Life tried banishing the gods," I said. "It didn't work. If we lock you away, we're no better than they are. It doesn't solve anything."

"I couldn't agree more," Set groaned. "So if you'll just loosen these bonds—"

"You're still a villainous piece of scum," I said. "But you have a role to play, and you'll need controlling. I'll agree to release you—*if* you swear to behave, to return to the Duat, and not cause trouble until we call you. And then you'll make trouble only for us, fighting against Apophis."

"Or I could chop off your head," Carter suggested. "That would probably exile you for a good long while."

Set glanced back and forth between us. "Make trouble for you, eh? That *is* my specialty."

"Swear by your own name and the throne of Ra," I said. "You will leave now and not reappear until you are called."

"Oh, I swear," he said, much too quickly. "By my name and Ra's throne and our mother's starry elbows."

"If you betray us," I warned, "I have your name. I won't show you mercy a second time."

"You always were my favorite sister."

I gave him one last shock, just to remind him of my power, and then let the bindings dissolve.

Set stood up and flexed his arms. He appeared as a warrior with red armor and red skin, a black, forked beard, and twinkling, cruel eyes; but in the Duat, I saw his other side, a raging inferno just barely contained, waiting to be unleashed and burn everything in its path. He winked at Horus, then pretended to shoot me with a finger gun. "Oh, this will be *good*. We're going to have so much fun."

"Begone, Evil Day," I said.

He turned into a pillar of salt and dissolved.

The snow in the National Mall had melted in a perfect square, the exact size of Set's pyramid. Around the edges, a dozen magicians still lay passed out. The poor dears had started to stir when our portal closed, but the explosion of the pyramid had knocked them all out again. Other mortals in the area had also been affected. An early-morning jogger was slumped on the sidewalk. On nearby streets, cars idled while the drivers took naps over the steering wheels.

Not everyone was asleep, though. Police sirens wailed in the distance, and seeing as how we'd teleported practically into the president's backyard, I knew it wouldn't be long before we had a great deal of heavily armed company.

Carter and I ran to the center of the melted square, where Amos and Zia lay crumpled in the grass. There was no sign of Set's throne or the golden coffin, but I tried to push those thoughts out of my mind.

Amos groaned. "What…" His eyes clouded over with terror. "Set…he…he…"

"Rest." I put my hand on his forehead. He was burning with fever. The pain in his mind was so sharp, it cut me like a razor. I remembered a spell Isis had taught me in New Mexico.

"Quiet," I whispered. *"Hah-ri."*

Faint hieroglyphs glowed over his face:

Amos drifted back to sleep, but I knew it was only a temporary fix.

Zia was even worse off. Carter cradled her head and spoke reassuringly about how she would be fine, but she looked bad. Her skin was a strange reddish color, dry and brittle, as if she'd suffered a horrible sunburn. In the grass around her, hieroglyphs were fading—the remains of a protective circle—and I thought I understood what had happened. She'd used her last bit of energy to shield herself and Amos when the pyramid imploded.

"Set?" she asked weakly. "Is he gone?"

"Yes." Carter glanced at me, and I knew we'd be keeping the details to ourselves. "Everything's fine, thanks to you. The secret name worked."

She nodded, satisfied, and her eyes began to close.

"Hey." Carter's voice quavered. "Stay awake. You're not going to leave me alone with Sadie, are you? She's bad company."

Zia tried to smile, but the effort made her wince. "I was…never here, Carter. Just a message—a placeholder."

"Come on. No. That's no way to talk."

"Find her, will you?" Zia said. A tear traced its way down her nose. "She'd…like that…a date at the mall." Her eyes drifted away from him and stared blankly into the sky.

"Zia!" Carter clutched her hand. "Stop that. You can't…You can't just…"

I knelt next to him and touched Zia's face. It was cold as stone. And even though I understood

what had happened, I couldn't think of anything to say, or any way to console my brother. He shut his eyes tight and lowered his head.

Then it happened. Along the path of Zia's tear, from the corner of her eye to the base of her nose, Zia's face cracked. Smaller fractures appeared, webbing her skin. Her flesh dried out, hardening… turning to clay.

"Carter," I said.

"What?" he said miserably.

He looked up just as a small blue light drifted out of Zia's mouth and flew into the sky. Carter backed away in shock. "What—what did you do?"

"Nothing," I said. "She's a *shabti*. She said she wasn't really here. She was just a placeholder."

Carter looked bewildered. But then a small light started to burn in his eyes—a tiny bit of hope. "Then…the real Zia is alive?"

"Iskandar was protecting her," I said. "When the spirit of Nephthys joined with the real Zia in London, Iskandar knew she was in danger. Iskandar hid her away and replaced her with a *shabti*. Remember what Thoth said: '*shabti* make excellent stunt doubles?' That's what she was. And Nephthys told me she was sheltered somewhere, inside a sleeping host."

"But where—"

"I don't know," I said. And in Carter's present state, I was too afraid to raise the *real* question: If Zia had been a *shabti* all this time, had we ever known her at all? The real Zia had never gotten close to us. She'd never discovered what an incredibly amazing person I was. God forbid, she might not even like Carter.

Carter touched her face and it crumbled to dust. He picked up her wand, which remained solid ivory, but he held it gingerly as if he were afraid it too would dissolve. "That blue light," he began to ramble, "I saw Zia release one in the First Nome, too. Just like the *shabti* in Memphis—they sent their thoughts back to Thoth. So Zia must've been in contact with her *shabti*. That's what the light was. They must've been, like, sharing memories, right? She must *know* what the *shabti's* been through. If the real Zia is alive somewhere, she might be locked up or in some kind of magic sleep or — We have to find her!"

I wasn't sure it would be so simple, but I didn't want to argue. I could see the desperation on his face.

Then a familiar voice sent a cold shiver down my back: "What have you done?"

Desjardins was literally fuming. His tattered robes still smoked from battle. (Carter says I shouldn't mention that his pink boxer shorts were showing, but they were!) His staff was aglow, and the whiskers in his beard smoldered. Behind him stood three equally battered magicians, who all looked as if they'd just regained consciousness.

"Oh, good," I muttered. "You're alive."

"You bargained with Set?" Desjardins demanded. "You let him *go*?"

"We don't answer to you," Carter growled. He stepped forward, hand on his sword, but I put out my arm to hold him back.

"Desjardins," I said as calmly as I could, "Apophis is rising, in case you missed that part. We need the gods. The House of Life has to relearn the old ways."

"The old ways destroyed us!" he yelled.

A week ago, the look in his eyes would've made me tremble. He fairly glowed with rage, and hieroglyphs blazed in the air around him. He was the Chief Lector, and I'd just undone everything the House had worked for since the fall of Egypt. Desjardins was a heartbeat away from turning me into an insect, and the thought should've terrified me.

Instead, I looked him in the eye. Right now, I was more powerful than he was. *Much* more powerful. And I let him know it.

"Pride destroyed you," I said. "Greed and selfishness and all of that. It's hard to follow the path of the gods. But it is part of magic. You can't just shut it down."

"You are drunk with power," he snarled. "The gods have possessed you, as they always do. Soon you will forget you are even human. We will fight you and destroy you." Then he glared at Carter. "And *you*—I know what Horus would demand. You will never reclaim the throne. With my last breath—"

"Save it," I said. Then I faced my brother. "You know what we have to do?"

Understanding passed between us. I was surprised how easily I could read him. I thought it might be the influence of the gods, but then I realized it was because we were both Kanes, brother and sister. And Carter, god help me, was also my friend.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "We're leaving ourselves open." He glared at Desjardins. "Just one more good smack with the sword?"

"I'm sure, Carter."

I closed my eyes and focused.

Consider carefully, Isis said. *What we've done so far is only the beginning of the power we could wield together.*

That's the problem, I said. *I'm not ready for that. I've got to get there on my own, the hard way.*

You are wise for a mortal, Isis said. *Very well.*

Imagine giving up a fortune in cash. Imagine throwing away the most beautiful diamond necklace in the world. Separating myself from Isis was harder than that, *much* harder.

But it wasn't impossible. *I know my limits,* my mother had said, and now I understood how wise she'd been.

I felt the spirit of the goddess leave me. Part of her flowed into my necklace, but most of her streamed into the Washington Monument, back into the Duat, where Isis would go…somewhere else. Another host? I wasn't sure.

When I opened my eyes, Carter stood next to me looking grief-stricken, holding his Eye of Horus amulet.

Desjardins was so stunned, he momentarily forgot how to speak English. *"Ce n'est pas possible. On ne pourrait pas—"*

"Yes, we could," I said. "We've given up the gods of our own free will. And you've got a lot to learn about what's possible."

Carter threw down his sword. "Desjardins, I'm not after the throne. Not unless I earn it by myself, and that's going to take time. We're going to learn the path of the gods. We're going to teach

others. You can waste time trying to destroy us, or you can help."

The sirens were much closer now. I could see the lights of emergency vehicles coming from several directions, slowly cordoning off the National Mall. We had only minutes before we were surrounded.

Desjardins looked at the magicians behind him, probably gauging how much support he could rally. His brethren looked in awe. One even started to bow to me, then caught himself.

Alone, Desjardins might've been able to destroy us. We were just magicians now—very tired magicians, with hardly any formal training.

Desjardins' nostrils flared. Then he surprised me by lowering his staff. "There has been too much destruction today. But the path of the gods shall remain closed. If you cross the House of Life again…"

He let the threat hang in the air. He slammed his staff down, and with a final burst of energy, the four magicians dissolved into wind and gusted away.

Suddenly I felt exhausted. The terror of what I'd been through began to sink in. We'd survived, but that was little consolation. I missed my parents. I missed them terribly. I wasn't a goddess anymore. I was just a regular girl, alone with only my brother.

Then Amos groaned and started sitting up. Police cars and sinister-looking black vans blocked the curbs all around us. Sirens blared. A helicopter sliced through the air over the Potomac, closing fast. God only knew what the mortals thought had happened at the Washington Monument, but I didn't want my face on the nightly news.

"Carter, we have to get out of here," I said. "Can you summon enough magic to change Amos into something small—a mouse maybe? We can fly him out."

He nodded, still in a daze. "But Dad…we didn't…"

He looked around helplessly. I knew how he felt. The pyramid, the throne, the golden coffin—all of it was gone. We'd come so far to rescue our father, only to lose him. And Carter's first girlfriend lay at his feet in a pile of pottery shards. That probably didn't help either. (Carter protests that she wasn't really his girlfriend. Oh, please!)

I couldn't dwell on it, though. I had to be strong for both of us or we'd end up in prison.

"First things first," I said. "We have to get Amos to safety."

"Where?" Carter asked.

There was only one place I could think of.

41. We Stop the Recording, for Now

I CAN'T BELIEVE SADIE'S GOING TO let me have the last word. Our experience together must've really taught her something. Ow, she just hit me. Never mind.

Anyway, I'm glad she told that last part. I think she understood it better than I did. And the whole thing about Zia not being Zia and Dad not getting rescued…that was pretty hard to deal with.

If anybody felt worse than I did, it was Amos. I had just enough magic to turn myself into a falcon and him into a hamster (hey, I was rushed!), but a few miles from the National Mall, he started struggling to change back. Sadie and I were forced to land outside a train station, where Amos turned back into a human and curled into a shivering ball. We tried to talk to him, but he could barely complete a sentence.

Finally we got him into the station. We let him sleep on a bench while Sadie and I warmed up and watched the news.

According to Channel 5, the whole city of Washington was under lockdown. There'd been reports of explosions and weird lights at the Washington Monument, but all the cameras could show us was a big square of melted snow on the mall, which kind of made for boring video. Experts came on and talked about terrorism, but eventually it became clear that there'd been no permanent damage—just a bunch of scary lights. After a while, the media started speculating about freak storm activity or a rare southern appearance of the Northern Lights. Within an hour, the authorities opened up the city.

I wished we had Bast with us, because Amos was in no shape to be our chaperone; but we managed to buy tickets for our "sick" uncle and ourselves as far as New York.

I slept on the way, the amulet of Horus clutched in my hand.

We got back to Brooklyn at sunset.

We found the mansion burned out, which we'd expected, but we had nowhere else to go. I knew we'd made the right choice when we guided Amos through the doorway and heard a familiar, *"Agh! Agh!"*

"Khufu!" Sadie cried.

The baboon tackled her in a hug and climbed onto her shoulders. He picked at her hair, seeing if she'd brought him any good bugs to eat. Then he jumped off and grabbed a half-melted basketball. He grunted at me insistently, pointing to a makeshift basket he'd made out of some burned beams and a laundry basket. It was a gesture of forgiveness, I realized. He had forgiven me for sucking at his favorite game, and he was offering lessons. Looking around, I realized that he'd tried to clean up in his own baboon way, too. He'd dusted off the one surviving sofa, stacked Cheerios boxes in the

fireplace, and even put a dish of water and fresh food out for Muffin, who was curled up asleep on a little pillow. In the clearest part of the living room, under an intact section of roof, Khufu had made three separate mounds of pillows and sheets—sleeping places for us.

I got a lump in my throat. Seeing the care that he'd taken getting ready for us, I couldn't imagine a better welcome home present.

"Khufu," I said, "you are one freaking awesome baboon."

"Agh!" he said, pointing to the basketball.

"You want to school me?" I said. "Yeah, I deserve it. Just give us a second to…"

My smile melted when I saw Amos.

He'd drifted over to the ruined statue of Thoth. The god's cracked ibis head lay at his feet. His hands had broken off, and his tablet and stylus lay shattered on the ground. Amos stared at the headless god—the patron of magicians—and I could guess what he was thinking. *A bad omen for a homecoming*.

"It's okay," I told him. "We're going to make it right."

If Amos heard me, he gave no sign. He drifted over to the couch and plopped down, putting his head in his hands.

Sadie glanced at me uneasily. Then she looked around at the blackened walls, the crumbling ceilings, the charred remains of the furniture.

"Well," she said, trying to sound upbeat. "How about I play basketball with Khufu, and you can clean the house?"

Even with magic, it took us several weeks to put the house back in order. That was just to make it livable. It was hard without Isis and Horus helping, but we could still do magic. It just took a lot more concentration and a lot more time. Every day, I went to sleep feeling as if I'd done twelve hours of hard labor; but eventually we got the walls and ceilings repaired, and cleaned up the debris until the house no longer smelled of smoke. We even managed to fix the terrace and the pool. We brought Amos out to watch as we released the wax crocodile figurine into the water, and Philip of Macedonia sprang to life.

Amos almost smiled when he saw that. Then he sank into a chair on the terrace and stared desolately at the Manhattan skyline.

I began to wonder if he would ever be the same. He'd lost too much weight. His face looked haggard. Most days he wore his bathrobe and didn't even bother to comb his hair.

"He was taken over by Set," Sadie told me one morning, when I mentioned how worried I was. "Do you have any idea how *violating* that is? His will was broken. He doubts himself and… Well, it may be a long time…."

We tried to lose ourselves in work. We repaired the statue of Thoth, and fixed the broken *shabti* in the library. I was better at grunt work—moving blocks of stone or heaving ceiling beams into place. Sadie was better at fine details, like repairing the hieroglyphic seals on the doors. Once, she really impressed me by imagining her bedroom just as it had been and speaking the joining spell, *hi-nehm*. Pieces of furniture flew together out of the debris, and *boom*!: instant repair job. Of course, Sadie passed out for twelve hours afterward, but still…pretty cool. Slowly but surely, the mansion began to feel like home.

At night I would sleep with my head on a charmed headrest, which mostly kept my *ba* from drifting off; but sometimes I still had strange visions—the red pyramid, the serpent in the sky, or the face of my father as he was trapped in Set's coffin. Once I thought I heard Zia's voice trying to tell me something from far away, but I couldn't make out the words.

Sadie and I kept our amulets locked in a box in the library. Every morning I would sneak down to make sure they were still there. I would find them glowing, warm to the touch, and I would be tempted—very tempted—to put on the Eye of Horus. But I knew I couldn't. The power was too addictive, too dangerous. I'd achieved a balance with Horus once, under extreme circumstances, but I knew it would be too easy to get overwhelmed if I tried it again. I had to train first, become a more powerful magician, before I would be ready to tap that much power.

One night at dinner, we had a visitor.

Amos had gone to bed early, as he usually did. Khufu was inside watching ESPN with Muffin on his lap. Sadie and I sat exhausted on the deck overlooking the river. Philip of Macedonia floated silently in his pool. Except for the hum of the city, the night was quiet.

I'm not sure how it happened, but one minute we were alone, and the next there was a guy standing at the railing. He was lean and tall, with messed-up hair and pale skin, and his clothes were all black, as if he'd mugged a priest or something. He was probably around sixteen, and even though I'd never seen his face before, I had the weirdest feeling that I knew him.

Sadie stood up so quickly she knocked over her split-pea soup—which is gross enough in the bowl, but running all over the table? Yuck.

"Anubis!" she blurted.

Anubis? I thought she was kidding, because this guy did not look anything like the slavering jackal-headed god I'd seen in the Land of the Dead. He stepped forward, and my hand crept for my wand.

"Sadie," he said. "Carter. Would you come with me, please?"

"Sure," Sadie said, her voice a little strangled.

"Hold on," I said. "Where are we going?"

Anubis gestured behind him, and a door opened in the air—a pure black rectangle. "Someone wants to see you."

Sadie took his hand and stepped through into the darkness, which left me no choice but to follow.

The Hall of Judgment had gotten a makeover. The golden scales still dominated the room, but they had been fixed. The black pillars still marched off into the gloom on all four sides. But now I could see the overlay—the strange holographic image of the real world—and it was no longer a graveyard, as Sadie had described. It was a white living room with tall ceilings and huge picture windows. Double doors led to a terrace that looked out over the ocean.

I was struck speechless. I looked at Sadie, and judging from the shock on her face, I guessed she recognized the place too: our house in Los Angeles, in the hills overlooking the Pacific—the last place we'd lived as a family.

"The Hall of Judgment is intuitive," a familiar voice said. "It responds to strong memories."

Only then did I notice the throne wasn't empty anymore. Sitting there, with Ammit the Devourer

curled at his feet, was our father.

I almost ran to him, but something held me back. He looked the same in many ways—the long brown coat, the rumpled suit and dusty boots, his head freshly shaven and his beard trimmed. His eyes gleamed the way they did whenever I made him proud.

But his form shimmered with a strange light. Like the room itself, I realized, he existed in two worlds. I concentrated hard, and my eyes opened to a deeper level of the Duat.

Dad was still there, but taller and stronger, dressed in the robes and jewels of an Egyptian pharaoh. His skin was a dark shade of blue like the deep ocean.

Anubis walked over and stood at his side, but Sadie and I were a little more cautious.

"Well, come on," Dad said. "I won't bite."

Ammit the Devourer growled as we came close, but Dad stroked his crocodile head and shushed him. "These are my children, Ammit. Behave."

"D-Dad?" I stammered.

Now I want to be clear: even though weeks had passed since the battle with Set, and even though I'd been busy rebuilding the mansion the whole time, I hadn't stopped thinking about my dad for a minute. Every time I saw a picture in the library, I thought of the stories he used to tell me. I kept my clothes in a suitcase in my bedroom closet, because I couldn't bear the idea that our life traveling together was over. I missed him so much I would sometimes turn to tell him something before I forgot that he was gone. In spite of all that, and all the emotion boiling around inside me, all I could think of to say was: "You're blue."

My dad's laugh was so normal, so *him*, that it broke the tension. The sound echoed through the hall, and even Anubis cracked a smile.

"Goes with the territory," Dad said. "I'm sorry I didn't bring you here sooner, but things have been…" He looked at Anubis for the right word.

"Complicated," Anubis suggested.

"Complicated. I have meant to tell you both how proud I am of you, how much the gods are in your debt—"

"Hang on," Sadie said. She stomped right up to the throne. Ammit growled at her, but Sadie growled back, which confused the monster into silence.

"What *are* you?" she demanded. "My dad? Osiris? Are you even alive?"

Dad looked at Anubis. "What did I tell you about her? Fiercer than Ammit, I said."

"You didn't need to tell me." Anubis's face was grave. "I've learned to fear that sharp tongue."

Sadie looked outraged. "Excuse me?"

"To answer your question," Dad said, "I am both Osiris and Julius Kane. I am alive *and* dead, though the term *recycled* might be closer to the truth. Osiris is the god of the dead, and the god of new life. To return him to his throne—"

"You had to die," I said. "You knew this going into it. You *intentionally* hosted Osiris, knowing you would die."

I was shaking with anger. I didn't realize how strongly I'd felt about it, but I couldn't believe what my dad had done. "This is what you meant by 'making things right'?"

My dad's expression didn't change. He was still looking at me with pride and downright *joy*, as if everything I did delighted him—even my shouting. It was infuriating.

"I missed you, Carter," he said. "I can't tell you how much. But we made the right choice. We *all* did. If you had saved me in the world above, we would have lost everything. For the first time in millennia, we have a chance at rebirth, and a chance to stop chaos because of you."

"There had to be another way," I said. "You could've fought as a mortal, without…without—"

"Carter, when Osiris was alive, he was a great king. But when he died—"

"He became a thousand times more powerful," I said, remembering the story Dad used to tell me.

My father nodded. "The Duat is the foundation for the real world. If there is chaos here, it reverberates in the upper world. Helping Osiris to his throne was a first step, a thousand times more important than anything I could've done in the world above—except being your father. And I am still your father."

My eyes stung. I guess I understood what he was saying, but I didn't like it. Sadie looked even angrier than me, but she was glaring at Anubis.

"Sharp tongue?" she demanded.

Dad cleared his throat. "Children, there is another reason I made my choice, as you can probably guess." He held out his hand, and a woman in a black dress appeared next to him. She had golden hair, intelligent blue eyes, and a face that looked familiar. She looked like Sadie.

"Mom," I said.

She gazed back and forth from Sadie to me in amazement, as if *we* were the ghosts. "Julius told me how much you'd grown, but I couldn't believe it. Carter, I bet you're shaving—"

"Mom."

"—and dating girls—"

"Mom!" Have you ever noticed how parents can go from the most wonderful people in the world to totally embarrassing in three seconds?

She smiled at me, and I had to fight with about twenty different feelings at once. I'd spent years dreaming of being back with my parents, together in our house in L.A. But not like this: not with the house just an afterimage, and my mom a spirit, and my dad…recycled. I felt like the world was shifting under my feet, turning into sand.

"We can't go back, Carter," Mom said, as if reading my mind. "But nothing is lost, even in death. Do you remember the law of conservation?"

It had been six years since we'd sat together in the living room—*this* living room, and she'd read me the laws of physics the way most parents read bedtime stories. But I still remembered. "Energy and matter can't be created or destroyed."

"Only changed," my mother agreed. "And sometimes changed for the better."

She took Dad's hand, and I had to admit—blue and ghostly or not—they kind of looked happy.

"Mum." Sadie swallowed. For once, her attention wasn't on Anubis. "Did you really…was that —"

"Yes, my brave girl. My thoughts mixed with yours. I'm so proud of you. And thanks to Isis, I feel like I know you as well." She leaned forward and smiled conspiratorially. "I like chocolate

caramels, too, though your grandmum never approved of keeping sweets in the flat."

Sadie broke into a relieved grin. "I know! She's impossible!"

I got the feeling they were going to start chatting for hours, but just then the Hall of Judgment rumbled. Dad checked his watch, which made me wonder what time zone the Land of the Dead was in.

"We should wrap things up," he said. "The others are expecting you."

"Others?" I asked.

"A gift before you go." Dad nodded to Mom.

She stepped forward and handed me a palm-size package of folded black linen. Sadie helped me unwrap it, and inside was a new amulet—one that looked like a column or a tree trunk or…

"Is that a spine?" Sadie demanded.

"It is called a *djed*," Dad said. "My symbol—the spine of Osiris."

"Yuck," Sadie muttered.

Mom laughed. "It is a bit yuck, but honestly, it's a powerful symbol. Stands for stability, strength __"

"Backbone?" I asked.

"Literally." Mom gave me an approving look, and again I had that surreal shifting feeling. I couldn't believe I was standing here, having a chat with my somewhat dead parents.

Mom closed the amulet into my hands. Her touch was warm, like a living person's. "*Djed* also stands for the power of Osiris—renewed life from the ashes of death. This is exactly what you will need if you are to stir the blood of the pharaohs in others and rebuild the House of Life."

"The House won't like that," Sadie put in.

"No," Mom said cheerfully. "They certainly won't."

The Hall of Judgment rumbled again.

"It is time," Dad said. "We'll meet again, children. But until then, take care."

"Be mindful of your enemies," Mom added.

"And tell Amos…" Dad's voice trailed off thoughtfully. "Remind my brother that Egyptians believe in the power of the sunrise. They believe each morning begins not just a new day, but a new world."

Before I could figure out what that meant, the Hall of Judgment faded, and we stood with Anubis in a field of darkness.

"I'll show you the way," Anubis said. "It is my job."

He ushered us to a space in the darkness that looked no different from any other. But when he pushed with his hand, a door swung open. The entrance blazed with daylight.

Anubis bowed formally to me. Then he looked at Sadie with a glint of mischief in his eyes. "It's been…stimulating."

Sadie flushed and pointed at him accusingly. "We're not done, mister. I expect you to look after my parents. And next time I'm in the Land of the Dead, you and I will have words."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I'll look forward to that."

We stepped through the doorway and into the palace of the gods.

It looked just like Sadie had described from her visions: soaring stone columns, fiery braziers, a polished marble floor, and in the middle of the room, a gold-and-red throne. All around us, gods had gathered. Many were just flashes of light and fire. Some were shadowy images that shifted from animal to human. I recognized a few: Thoth flickered into view as a wild-haired guy in a lab coat before turning into a cloud of green gas; Hathor, the cow-headed goddess, gave me a puzzled look, as if she vaguely recognized me from the Magic Salsa incident. I looked for Bast, but my heart fell. She didn't seem to be in the crowd. In fact, most of the gods I didn't recognize.

"What have we started?" Sadie murmured.

I understood what she meant. The throne room was full of hundreds of gods, major and minor, all darting through the palace, forming new shapes, glowing with power. An entire supernatural army… and they all seemed to be staring at us.

Thankfully, two old friends stood next to the throne. Horus wore full battle armor and a *khopesh* sword at his side. His kohl-lined eyes—one gold, one silver—were as piercing as ever. At his side stood Isis in a shimmering white gown, with wings of light.

"Welcome," Horus said.

"*Um*, hi," I said.

"He has a way with words," Isis muttered, which made Sadie snort.

Horus gestured to the throne. "I know your thoughts, Carter, so I think I know what you will say. But I have to ask you one more time. Will you join me? We could rule the earth and the heavens. Ma'at demands a leader."

"Yeah, so I've heard."

"I would be stronger with you as my host. You've only touched the surface of what combat magic can do. We could accomplish great things, and it *is* your destiny to lead the House of Life. You could be the king of two thrones."

I glanced at Sadie, but she just shrugged. "Don't look at me. I find the idea horrifying."

Horus scowled at her, but the truth was, I agreed with Sadie. All those gods waiting for direction, all those magicians who hated us—the idea of trying to lead them made my knees turn to water.

"Maybe some day," I said. "Much later."

Horus sighed. "Five thousand years, and I still do not understand mortals. But—very well."

He stepped up to the throne and looked around at the assembled gods.

"I, Horus, son of Osiris, claim the throne of the heavens as my birthright!" he shouted. "What was once mine shall be mine again. Is there any who would challenge me?"

The gods flickered and glowed. A few scowled. One muttered something that sounded like "Cheese," although that could've been my imagination. I caught a glimpse of Sobek, or possibly

another crocodile god, snarling in the shadows. But no one raised a challenge.

Horus took his seat on the throne. Isis brought him a crook and flail—the twin scepters of the pharaohs. He crossed them over his chest and all the gods bowed before him.

When they'd risen again, Isis stepped toward us. "Carter and Sadie Kane, you have done much to restore Ma'at. The gods must gather their strength, and you have bought us time, though we do not know how much. Apophis will not stay locked away forever."

"I'd settle for a few hundred years," Sadie said.

Isis smiled. "However that may be, today you are heroes. The gods owe you a debt, and we take our debts seriously."

Horus rose from the throne. With a wink at me, he knelt before us. The other gods shifted uncomfortably, but then followed his example. Even the gods in fire form dimmed their flames.

I probably looked pretty stunned, because when Horus got up again he laughed. "You look like that time when Zia told you—"

"Yeah, could we skip that?" I said quickly. Letting a god into your head has serious disadvantages.

"Go in peace, Carter and Sadie," Horus said. "You will find our gift in the morning."

"Gift?" I asked nervously, because if I got one more magic amulet, I was going to break out in a cold sweat.

"You'll see," Isis promised. "We will be watching you, and waiting."

"That's what scares me," Sadie said.

Isis waved her hand, and suddenly we were back on the mansion's terrace as if nothing had happened.

Sadie turned toward me wistfully. "'Stimulating.'"

I held out my hand. The *djed* amulet was glowing and warm in its linen wrapping. "Any idea what this thing does?"

She blinked. "*Hmm*? Oh, don't care. What did Anubis look like to you?"

"What did…he looked like a guy. So?"

"A good-looking guy, or a slobbering dog-headed guy?"

"I guess…not the dog-headed guy."

"I knew it!" Sadie pointed at me as if she'd won an argument. "Good-looking. I knew it!"

And with a ridiculous grin, she spun around and skipped into the house.

My sister, as I may have mentioned, is a little strange.

The next day, we got the gods' gift.

We woke to find that the mansion had been completely repaired down to the smallest detail. Everything we hadn't finished yet—probably another month's worth of work—was done.

The first thing I found were new clothes in my closet, and after a moment's hesitation, I put them on. I went downstairs and found Khufu and Sadie dancing around the restored Great Room. Khufu had a new Lakers jersey and a brand-new basketball. The magical brooms and mops were busy doing their cleaning routine. Sadie looked up at me and grinned—and then her expression changed to shock.

"Carter, what—what are you *wearing*?"

I came down the stairs, feeling even more self-conscious. The closet had offered me several choices this morning, not just my linen robes. My old clothes had been there, freshly cleaned—a button-down shirt, starched khaki slacks, loafers. But there had also been a third choice, and I'd taken it: some Reeboks, blue jeans, a T-shirt, and a hoodie.

"It's, *um*, all cotton," I said. "Okay for magic. Dad would probably think I look like a gangster…."

I thought for sure Sadie would tease me about that, and I was trying to beat her to the punch. She scrutinized every detail of my outfit.

Then she laughed with absolute delight. "It's brilliant, Carter. You look almost like a regular teenager! And *Dad* would think…" She pulled my hoodie over my head. "Dad would think you look like an impeccable magician, because that's what you are. Now, come on. Breakfast is waiting on the patio."

We were just digging in when Amos came outside, and his change of clothes was even more surprising than mine. He wore a crisp new chocolate-colored suit with matching coat and fedora. His shoes were shined, his round glasses polished, his hair freshly braided with amber beads. Sadie and I both stared at him.

"What?" he demanded.

"Nothing," we said in unison. Sadie looked at me and mouthed *O-M-G*, then went back to her bangers and eggs. I attacked my pancakes. Philip thrashed around happily in his swimming pool.

Amos joined us at the table. He flicked his fingers and coffee magically filled his cup. I raised my eyebrows. He hadn't used magic since the Demon Days.

"I thought I'd go away for a while," he announced. "To the First Nome."

Sadie and I exchanged glances.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" I asked.

Amos sipped his coffee. He stared across the East River as if he could see all the way to Washington, D.C. "They have the best magic healers there. They will not turn away a petitioner seeking aid—even me. I think…I think I should try."

His voice was fragile, like it would crack apart any moment. But still, it was the most he'd said in weeks.

"I think that's brilliant," Sadie offered. "We'll watch after the place, won't we, Carter?"

"Yeah," I said. "Absolutely."

"I may be gone for a while," Amos said. "Treat this as your home. It *is* your home." He hesitated, as if choosing his next words carefully. "And I think, perhaps, you should start recruiting. There are many children around the world with the blood of the pharaohs. Most do not know what they are. What you two said in Washington—about rediscovering the path of the gods—it may be our only chance."

Sadie got up and kissed Amos on the forehead. "Leave it to us, Uncle. I've got a plan."

"That," I said, "sounds like very bad news."

Amos managed a smile. He squeezed Sadie's hand, then got up and ruffled my hair as he headed inside.

I took another bite of my pancakes and wondered why—on such a great morning—I still felt sad, and a little incomplete. I suppose with so many things suddenly getting better, the things that were still missing hurt even worse.

Sadie picked at her scrambled eggs. "I suppose it would be selfish to ask for more."

I stared at her, and I realized we were thinking the same thing. When the gods had said a gift… Well, you can hope for things, but as Sadie said, I guess you can't get greedy.

"It's going to be hard to travel if we need to go recruiting," I said cautiously. "Two unaccompanied minors."

Sadie nodded. "No Amos. No responsible adult. I don't think Khufu counts."

And that's when the gods completed their gift.

A voice from the doorway said, "Sounds like you have a job opening."

I turned and felt a thousand pounds of grief drop from my shoulders. Leaning against the door in a leopard-spotted jumpsuit was a dark-haired lady with golden eyes and two very large knives.

"Bast!" Sadie cried.

The cat goddess gave us a playful smile, as if she had all kinds of trouble in mind. "Someone call for a chaperone?"

A few days later, Sadie had a long phone conversation with Gran and Grandpa Faust in London. They didn't ask to talk to me, and I didn't listen in. When Sadie came back down to the Great Room, she had a faraway look in her eyes. I was afraid—*very* afraid—that she was missing London.

"Well?" I asked reluctantly.

"I told them we were all right," she said. "They told me the police have stopped bothering them about the explosion at the British Museum. Apparently the Rosetta Stone turned up unharmed."

"Like magic," I said.

Sadie smirked. "The police decided it might've been a gas explosion, some sort of accident. Dad's off the hook, as are we. I could go home to London, they said. Spring term starts in a few weeks. My mates Liz and Emma have been asking about me."

The only sound was the crackle of fire in the hearth. The Great Room suddenly seemed bigger to me, emptier.

At last I said, "What did you tell them?"

Sadie raised an eyebrow. "God, you're thick sometimes. What do you think?"

"Oh." My mouth felt like sandpaper. "I guess it'll be good to see your friends and get back your old room, and—"

Sadie punched my arm. "Carter! I told them I couldn't very well go home, because I already *was* home. This is where I belong. Thanks to the Duat, I can see my friends whenever I want. And besides, you'd be lost without me."

I must've grinned like a fool, because Sadie told me to wipe the silly look off my face—but she sounded pleased about it. I suppose she knew she was right, for once. I would've been lost without her. [And no, Sadie, I can't believe I just said that either.]

Just when things were settling down to a nice safe routine, Sadie and I embarked on our new mission.

Our destination was a school that Sadie had seen in a dream. I won't tell you which school, but Bast drove us a long way to get there. We recorded this tape along the way. Several times the forces of chaos tried to stop us. Several times we heard rumors that our enemies were starting to hunt down other descendants of the pharaohs, trying to thwart our plans.

We got to the school the day before the spring term started. The hallways were empty, and it was easy to slip inside. Sadie and I picked a locker at random, and she told me to set the combination. I summoned some magic and mixed around the numbers: 13/32/33. Hey, why mess with a good formula?

Sadie said a spell and the locker began to glow. Then she put the package inside and closed the door.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked.

She nodded. "The locker is partially in the Duat. It'll store the amulet until the right person opens it."

"But if the *djed* falls into the wrong hands—"

"It won't," she promised. "The blood of the pharaohs is strong. The right kids will find the amulet. If they figure out how to use it, their powers should awaken. We have to trust that the gods will guide them to Brooklyn."

"We won't know how to train them," I argued. "No one has studied the path of the gods for two thousand years."

"We'll figure it out," Sadie said. "We have to."

"Unless Apophis gets us first," I said. "Or Desjardins and the House of Life. Or unless Set breaks his word. Or a thousand other things go wrong."

"Yes," Sadie said with a smile. "Be fun, eh?"

We locked the locker and walked away.

Now we're back at the Twenty-first Nome in Brooklyn.

We're going to send out this tape to a few carefully chosen people and see if it gets published. Sadie believes in fate. If the story falls into your hands, there's probably a reason. Look for the *djed*. It won't take much to awaken your power. Then the trick is learning to use that power without dying.

As I said at the beginning: the whole story hasn't happened yet. Our parents promised to see us again, so I know we'll have to go back to the Land of the Dead eventually, which I think is fine with Sadie, as long as Anubis is there.

Zia is out there somewhere—the real Zia. I intend to find her.

Most of all, chaos is rising. Apophis is gaining strength. Which means we have to gain strength too—gods and men, united like in olden times. It's the only way the world won't be destroyed.

So the Kane family has a lot of work to do. And so do you.

Maybe you'll want to follow the path of Horus or Isis, Thoth or Anubis, or even Bast. I don't know. But whatever you decide, the House of Life needs new blood if we're going to survive.

So this is Carter and Sadie Kane signing off.

Come to Brooklyn. We'll be waiting.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Much of this story is based on fact, which makes me think that either the two narrators, Sadie and Carter, did a great deal of research…or they are telling the truth.

The House of Life did exist, and was an important part of Egyptian society for several millennia. Whether or not it still exists today—that is something I cannot answer. But it is undeniable that Egyptian magicians were famed throughout the ancient world, and many of the spells they could supposedly cast are exactly as described in this story.

The way the narrators portray Egyptian magic is also supported by archaeological evidence. *Shabti*, Curved Wands, and Magicians' boxes have survived, and can be viewed in many museums. All of the artifacts and monuments Sadie and Carter mention actually exist—with the possible exception of the red pyramid. There is a "Red Pyramid" at Giza, but it is only called that because the original white casing stones were stripped away, revealing the pink granite blocks underneath. In fact the pyramid's owner, Senefru, would be horrified to learn his pyramid is now red, the color of Set. As for the magical red pyramid mentioned in the story, we can only hope that it has been destroyed.

Should further recordings fall into my hands, I will relay the information. Until then, we can only hope that Carter and Sadie are wrong in their predictions about the rise of chaos….

BOOK TWO

THE THRONE OF FIRE

RICK RIORDAN

Disney • Hyperion Books
New York

For Conner and Maggie, the Riordan family's great brother-sister team

WARNING

This is a transcript of an audio recording. Carter and Sadie Kane first made themselves known in a recording I received last year, which I transcribed as The Red Pyramid. *This second audio file arrived at my residence shortly after that book was published, so I can only assume the Kanes trust me enough to continue relaying their story. If this second recording is a truthful account, the turn of events can only be described as alarming. For the sake of the Kanes, and for the world, I hope what follows is fiction. Otherwise we are all in very serious trouble.*

CARTER

1. Fun with Spontaneous Combustion

CARTER HERE.

Look, we don't have time for long introductions. I need to tell this story quickly, or we're all going to die.

If you didn't listen to our first recording, well…pleased to meet you: the Egyptian gods are running around loose in the modern world; a bunch of magicians called the House of Life is trying to stop them; everyone hates Sadie and me; and a big snake is about to swallow the sun and destroy the world.

[Ow! What was that for?]

Sadie just punched me. She says I'm going to scare you too much. I should back up, calm down, and start at the beginning.

Fine. But personally, I think you *should* be scared.

The point of this recording is to let you know what's really happening and how things went wrong. You're going to hear a lot of people talking trash about us, but we didn't cause those deaths. As for the snake, that wasn't our fault either. Well…not exactly. All the magicians in the world *have* to come together. It's our only chance.

So here's the story. Decide for yourself. It started when we set Brooklyn on fire.

The job was supposed to be simple: sneak into the Brooklyn Museum, borrow a particular Egyptian artifact, and leave without getting caught.

No, it wasn't robbery. We would have returned the artifact eventually. But I guess we did look suspicious: four kids in black ninja clothes on the roof of the museum. Oh, and a baboon, also dressed like a ninja. *Definitely* suspicious.

The first thing we did was send our trainees Jaz and Walt to open the side window, while Khufu, Sadie, and I examined the big glass dome in the middle of the roof, which was supposed to be our exit strategy.

Our exit strategy wasn't looking too good.

It was well after dark, and the museum was supposed to be closed. Instead, the glass dome glowed with light. Inside, forty feet below, hundreds of people in tuxedos and evening gowns mingled and danced in a ballroom the size of an airplane hangar. An orchestra played, but with the wind howling in my ears and my teeth chattering, I couldn't hear the music. I was freezing in my linen pajamas.

Magicians are supposed to wear linen because it doesn't interfere with magic, which is

probably a great tradition in the Egyptian desert, where it's hardly ever cold and rainy. In Brooklyn, in March—not so much.

My sister, Sadie, didn't seem bothered by the cold. She was undoing the locks on the dome while humming along to something on her iPod. I mean, seriously—who brings their own tunes to a museum break-in?

She was dressed in clothes like mine except she wore combat boots. Her blond hair was streaked with red highlights —very subtle for a stealth mission. With her blue eyes and her light complexion, she looked absolutely nothing like me, which we both agreed was fine. It's always nice to have the option of denying that the crazy girl next to me is my sister.

"You said the museum would be empty," I complained.

Sadie didn't hear me until I pulled out her earbuds and repeated myself.

"Well, it was *supposed* to be empty." She'll deny this, but after living in the States for the last three months, she was starting to lose her British accent. "The Web site said it closed at five. How was I to know there'd be a wedding?"

A wedding? I looked down and saw that Sadie was right. Some of the ladies wore peach-colored bridesmaid dresses. One of the tables had a massive tiered white cake. Two separate mobs of guests had lifted the bride and groom on chairs and were carrying them through the room while their friends swirled around them, dancing and clapping. The whole thing looked like a head-on furniture collision waiting to happen.

Khufu tapped on the glass. Even in his black clothes, it was hard for him to blend into the shadows with his golden fur, not to mention his rainbow-colored nose and rear end.

"Agh!" he grunted.

Since he was a baboon, that could've meant anything from *Look, there's food down there* to *This glass is dirty* to *Hey, those people are doing stupid things with chairs.*

"Khufu's right," Sadie interpreted. "We'll have a hard time sneaking out through the party. Perhaps if we pretend we're a maintenance crew—"

"Sure," I said. "'Excuse us. Four kids coming through with a three-ton statue. Just going to float it up through the roof. Don't mind us.'"

Sadie rolled her eyes. She pulled out her wand—a curved length of ivory carved with pictures of monsters—and pointed it at the base of the dome. A golden hieroglyph blazed, and the last padlock popped open.

"Well, if we're not going to use this as an exit," she said, "why am I opening it? Couldn't we just come out the way we're going in—through the side window?"

"I told you. The statue is *huge.* It won't fit through the side window. Plus, the traps—"

"Try again tomorrow night, then?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Tomorrow the whole exhibit is being boxed up and shipped off on tour."

She raised her eyebrows in that annoying way she has. "Perhaps if someone had given us more *notice* that we needed to steal this statue—"

"Forget it." I could tell where this conversation was going, and it wasn't going to help if Sadie and I argued on the roof all night. She was right, of course. I hadn't given her much notice. But, hey—my sources weren't exactly reliable. After weeks of asking for help, I'd finally gotten a tip from my

buddy the falcon war god Horus, speaking in my dreams: *Oh, by the way, that artifact you wanted? The one that might hold the key to saving the planet? It's been sitting down the street in the Brooklyn Museum for the last thirty years, but tomorrow it leaves for Europe, so you'd better hurry! You'll have five days to figure out how to use it, or we're all doomed. Good luck!*

I could've screamed at him for not telling me sooner, but it wouldn't have made any difference. Gods only talk when they're ready, and they don't have a good sense of mortal time. I knew this because Horus had shared space in my head a few months ago. I still had some of his antisocial habits—like the occasional urge to hunt small furry rodents or challenge people to the death.

"Let's just stick to the plan," Sadie said. "Go in through the side window, find the statue, and float it out through the ballroom. We'll figure out how to deal with the wedding party when we get that far. Maybe create a diversion."

I frowned. "A diversion?"

"Carter, you worry too much," she said. "It'll be brilliant. Unless you have another idea?"

The problem was—I didn't.

You'd think magic would make things easier. In fact, it usually made things more complicated. There were always a million reasons why this or that spell wouldn't work in certain situations. Or there'd be other magic thwarting you—like the protective spells on this museum.

We weren't sure who had cast them. Maybe one of the museum staff was an undercover magician, which wouldn't have been uncommon. Our own dad had used his Ph.D. in Egyptology as a cover to gain access to artifacts. Plus, the Brooklyn Museum has the largest collection of Egyptian magic scrolls in the world. That's why our uncle Amos had located his headquarters in Brooklyn. A lot of magicians might have reasons to guard or booby-trap the museum's treasures.

Whatever the case, the doors and windows had some pretty nasty curses on them. We couldn't open a magic portal into the exhibit, nor could we use our retrieval *shabti*—the magical clay statues that served us in our library—to bring us the artifact we needed.

We'd have to get in and get out the hard way; and if we made a mistake, there was no telling what sort of curse we'd unleash: monster guardians, plagues, fires, exploding donkeys (don't laugh; they're bad news).

The only exit that wasn't booby-trapped was the dome at the top of the ballroom. Apparently the museum's guardians hadn't been worried about thieves levitating artifacts out of an opening forty feet in the air. Or maybe the dome *was* trapped, and it was just too well hidden for us to see.

Either way, we had to try. We only had tonight to steal—sorry, *borrow*—the artifact. Then we had five days to figure out how to use it. I just love deadlines.

"So we push on and improvise?" Sadie asked.

I looked down at the wedding party, hoping we weren't about to ruin their special night. "Guess so."

"Lovely," Sadie said. "Khufu, stay here and keep watch. Open the dome when you see us coming up, yeah?"

"Agh!" said the baboon.

The back of my neck tingled. I had a feeling this heist was *not* going to be lovely.

"Come on," I told Sadie. "Let's see how Jaz and Walt are doing."

We dropped to the ledge outside the third floor, which housed the Egyptian collection.

Jaz and Walt had done their work perfectly. They'd duct-taped four Sons of Horus statues around the edges of the window and painted hieroglyphs on the glass to counteract the curses and the mortal alarm system.

As Sadie and I landed next to them, they seemed to be in the middle of a serious conversation. Jaz was holding Walt's hands. That surprised me, but it surprised Sadie even more. She made a squeaking sound like a mouse getting stepped on.

[Oh yes, you did. I was *there*.]

Why would Sadie care? Okay, right after New Year's, when Sadie and I sent out our *djed* amulet beacon to attract kids with magic potential to our headquarters, Jaz and Walt had been the first to respond. They'd been training with us for seven weeks, longer than any of the other kids, so we'd gotten to know them pretty well.

Jaz was a cheerleader from Nashville. Her name was short for Jasmine, but don't ever call her that unless you want to get turned into a shrub. She was pretty in a blond cheerleader kind of way—not really my type—but you couldn't help liking her because she was nice to everyone and always ready to help. She had a talent for healing magic, too, so she was a great person to bring along in case something went wrong, which happened with Sadie and me about ninety-nine percent of the time.

Tonight she'd covered her hair in a black bandanna. Slung across her shoulder was her magician's bag, marked with the symbol of the lion goddess Sekhmet.

She was just telling Walt, "We'll figure it out," when Sadie and I dropped down next to them.

Walt looked embarrassed.

He was…well, how do I describe Walt?

[No thanks, Sadie. I'm not going to describe him as *hot*. Wait your turn.]

Walt was fourteen, same as me, but he was tall enough to play varsity forward. He had the right build for it—lean and muscular—and the dude's feet were huge. His skin was coffee-bean brown, a little darker than mine, and his hair was buzz cut so that it looked like a shadow on his scalp. Despite the cold, he was dressed in a black sleeveless tee and workout shorts—not standard magician clothes—but nobody argued with Walt. He'd been our first trainee to arrive—all the way from Seattle—and the guy was a natural *sau*—a charm maker. He wore a bunch of gold neck chains with magic amulets he'd made himself.

Anyway, I was pretty sure Sadie was jealous of Jaz and liked Walt, though she'd never admit it because she'd spent the last few months moping about another guy—actually a god—she had a crush on.

[Yeah, fine, Sadie. I'll drop it for now. But I notice you're not denying it.]

When we interrupted their conversation, Walt let go of Jaz's hands real quick and stepped away. Sadie's eyes moved back and forth between them, trying to figure out what was going on.

Walt cleared his throat. "Window's ready."

"Brilliant." Sadie looked at Jaz. "What did you mean, 'We'll figure it out'?"

Jaz flapped her mouth like a fish trying to breathe.

Walt answered for her: "You know. The Book of Ra. We'll figure it out."

"Yes!" Jaz said. "The Book of Ra."

I could tell they were lying, but I figured it was none of my business if they liked each other. We didn't have time for drama.

"Okay," I said before Sadie could demand a better explanation. "Let's start the fun."

The window swung open easily. No magic explosions. No alarms. I breathed a sigh of relief and stepped into the Egyptian wing, wondering if maybe we had a shot at pulling this off, after all.

The Egyptian artifacts brought back all kinds of memories. Until last year, I'd spent most of my life traveling around the world with my dad as he went from museum to museum, lecturing on Ancient Egypt. That was before I knew he was a magician—before he unleashed a bunch of gods, and our lives got complicated.

Now I couldn't look at Egyptian artwork without feeling a personal connection. I shuddered when we passed a statue of Horus—the falcon-headed god who'd inhabited my body last Christmas. We walked by a sarcophagus, and I remembered how the evil god Set had imprisoned our father in a golden coffin at the British Museum. Everywhere there were pictures of Osiris, the blue-skinned god of the dead, and I thought about how Dad had sacrificed himself to become Osiris's new host. Right now, somewhere in the magic realm of the Duat, our dad was the king of the underworld. I can't even describe how weird it felt seeing a five-thousand-year-old painting of some blue Egyptian god and thinking, "Yep, that's my dad."

All the artifacts seemed like family mementos: a wand just like Sadie's; a picture of the serpent leopards that had once attacked us; a page from the Book of the Dead showing demons we'd met in person. Then there were the *shabti,* magical figurines that were supposed to come to life when summoned. A few months ago, I'd fallen for a girl named Zia Rashid, who'd turned out to be a *shabti*.

Falling in love for the first time had been hard enough. But when the girl you like turns out to be ceramic and cracks to pieces before your eyes—well, it gives "breaking your heart" a new meaning.

We made our way through the first room, passing under a big Egyptian-style zodiac mural on the ceiling. I could hear the celebration going on in the grand ballroom down the hallway to our right. Music and laughter echoed through the building.

In the second Egyptian room, we stopped in front of a stone frieze the size of a garage door. Chiseled into the rock was a picture of a monster trampling some humans.

"Is that a griffin?" Jaz asked.

I nodded. "The Egyptian version, yeah."

The animal had a lion's body and the head of a falcon, but its wings weren't like most griffin pictures you see. Instead of bird wings, the monster's wings ran across the top of its back—long, horizontal, and bristly like a pair of upside-down steel brushes. If the monster could've flown with those things at all, I figured they must've moved like a butterfly's wings. The frieze had once been painted. I could make out flecks of red and gold on the creature's hide; but even without color, the griffin looked eerily lifelike. Its beady eyes seemed to follow me.

"Griffins were protectors," I said, remembering something my dad had once told me. "They guarded treasures and stuff."

"Fab," Sadie said. "So you mean they attacked…oh, *thieves,* for instance, breaking into museums and stealing artifacts?"

"It's just a frieze," I said. But I doubt that made anyone feel better. Egyptian magic was all about

turning words and pictures into reality.

"There." Walt pointed across the room. "That's it, right?"

We made a wide arc around the griffin and walked over to a statue in the center of the room.

The god stood about eight feet tall. He was carved from black stone and dressed in typical Egyptian style: bare-chested, with a kilt and sandals. He had the face of a ram and horns that had partially broken off over the centuries. On his head was a Frisbee-shaped crown—a sun disk, braided with serpents. In front of him stood a much smaller human figure. The god was holding his hands over the little dude's head, as though giving him a blessing.

Sadie squinted at the hieroglyphic inscription. Ever since she'd hosted the spirit of Isis, goddess of magic, Sadie had had an uncanny ability to read hieroglyphs.

"KNM," she read. "That'd be pronounced *Khnum,* I suppose. Rhymes with *ka-boom*?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "This is the statue we need. Horus told me it holds the secret to finding the Book of Ra."

Unfortunately, Horus hadn't been very specific. Now that we'd found the statue, I had absolutely no idea how it was supposed to help us. I scanned the hieroglyphs, hoping for a clue.

"Who's the little guy in front?" Walt asked. "A child?"

Jaz snapped her fingers. "No, I remember this! Khnum made humans on a potter's wheel. That's what he's doing here, I bet—forming a human out of clay."

She looked at me for confirmation. The truth was, I'd forgotten that story myself. Sadie and I were supposed to be the teachers, but Jaz often remembered more details than I did.

"Yeah, good," I said. "Man out of clay. Exactly."

Sadie frowned up at Khnum's ram head. "Looks a bit like that old cartoon…Bullwinkle, is it? Could be the moose god."

"He's not the moose god," I said.

"But if we're looking for the Book of Ra," she said, "and Ra's the *sun* god, then why are we searching a moose?"

Sadie can be annoying. Did I mention that?

"Khnum was one aspect of the sun god," I said. "Ra had three different personalities. He was Khepri the scarab god in the morning; Ra during the day; and Khnum, the ram-headed god, at sunset, when he went into the underworld."

"That's confusing," Jaz said.

"Not really," Sadie said. "Carter has different personalities. He goes from zombie in the morning to slug in the afternoon to—"

"Sadie," I said, "shut up."

Walt scratched his chin. "I think Sadie's right. It's a moose."

"*Thank* you," Sadie said.

Walt gave her a grudging smile, but he still looked preoccupied, like something was bothering him. I caught Jaz studying him with a worried expression, and I wondered what they'd been talking about earlier.

"Enough with the moose," I said. "We've got to get this statue back to Brooklyn House. It holds

some sort of clue—"

"But how do we find it?" Walt asked. "And you still haven't told us why we need this Book of Ra so badly."

I hesitated. There were a lot of things we hadn't told our trainees yet, not even Walt and Jaz—like how the world might end in five days. That kind of thing can distract you from your training.

"I'll explain when we get back," I promised. "Right now, let's figure out how to move the statue."

Jaz knitted her eyebrows. "I don't think it's going to fit in my bag."

"Oh, such worrying," Sadie said. "Look, we cast a levitation spell on the statue. We create some big diversion to clear the ballroom—"

"Hold up." Walt leaned forward and examined the smaller human figure. The little dude was smiling, like being fashioned out of clay was awesome fun. "He's wearing an amulet. A scarab."

"It's a common symbol," I said.

"Yeah…" Walt fingered his own collection of amulets. "But the scarab is a symbol of Ra's rebirth, right? And this statue shows Khnum creating a new life. Maybe we don't need the entire statue. Maybe the clue is—"

"Ah!" Sadie pulled out her wand. "Brilliant."

I was about to say, "Sadie, no!" but of course that would've been pointless. Sadie never listens to me.

She tapped the little dude's amulet. Khnum's hands glowed. The smaller statue's head peeled open in four sections like the top of a missile silo, and sticking out of its neck was a yellowed papyrus scroll.

"Voilà," Sadie said proudly.

She slipped her wand into her bag and grabbed the scroll just as I shouted, "It might be trapped!"

Like I said, she never listens.

As soon as she plucked the scroll from the statue, the entire room rumbled. Cracks appeared in the glass display cases.

Sadie yelped as the scroll in her hand burst into flames. They didn't seem to consume the papyrus or hurt Sadie; but when she tried to shake out the fire, ghostly white flames leaped to the nearest display case and raced around the room as if following a trail of gasoline. The fire touched the windows and white hieroglyphs ignited on the glass, probably triggering a ton of protective wards and curses. Then the ghost fire rippled across the big frieze at the entrance of the room. The stone slab shook violently. I couldn't see the carvings on the other side, but I heard a raspy scream—like a really large, really angry parrot.

Walt slipped his staff off his back. Sadie waved the flaming scroll as if it were stuck to her hand. "Get this thing off me! This is *so* not my fault!"

"Um…" Jaz pulled her wand. "What was that sound?"

My heart sank.

"I think," I said, "Sadie just found her big diversion."

CARTER

2. We Tame a Seven-Thousand-Pound Hummingbird

A FEW MONTHS AGO, things would've been different. Sadie could've spoken a single word and caused a military-grade explosion. I could've encased myself in a magical combat avatar, and almost nothing would've been able to defeat me.

But that was when we were fully merged with the gods—Horus for me, Isis for Sadie. We'd given up that power because it was simply too dangerous. Until we had better control of our own abilities, embodying Egyptian gods could make us go crazy or literally burn us up.

Now all we had was our own limited magic. That made it harder to do important stuff—like survive when a monster came to life and wanted to kill us.

The griffin stepped into full view. It was twice the size of a regular lion, its reddish-gold fur coated with limestone dust. Its tail was studded with spiky feathers that looked as hard and sharp as daggers. With a single flick, it pulverized the stone slab it had come from. Its bristly wings were now straight up on its back. When the griffin moved, they fluttered so fast, they blurred and buzzed like the wings of the world's largest, most vicious hummingbird.

The griffin fixed its hungry eyes on Sadie. White flames still engulfed her hand and the scroll, and the griffin seemed to take that as some kind of challenge. I'd heard a lot of falcon cries—hey, I'd *been* a falcon once or twice—but when this thing opened its beak, it let loose a screech that rattled the windows and set my hair on end.

"Sadie," I said, "drop the scroll."

"Hello? It's stuck to my hand!" she protested. "And I'm on fire! Did I mention that?"

Patches of ghost fire were burning across all the windows and artifacts now. The scroll seemed to have triggered every reservoir of Egyptian magic in the room, and I was pretty sure that was bad. Walt and Jaz stood frozen in shock. I suppose I couldn't blame them. This was their first real monster.

The griffin took a step toward my sister.

I stood shoulder to shoulder with her and did the one magic trick I still had down. I reached into the Duat and pulled my sword out of thin air—an Egyptian *khopesh* with a wickedly sharp, hook-shaped blade.

Sadie looked pretty silly with her hand and scroll on fire, like an overenthusiastic Statue of Liberty, but with her free hand she managed to summon her main offensive weapon—a five-foot-long staff carved with hieroglyphs.

Sadie asked, "Any hints on fighting griffins?"

"Avoid the sharp parts?" I guessed.

"Brilliant. Thanks for that."

"Walt," I called. "Check those windows. See if you can open them."

"B-but they're cursed."

"Yes," I said. "And if we try to exit through the ballroom, the griffin will eat us before we get there."

"I'll check the windows."

"Jaz," I said, "help Walt."

"Those markings on the glass," Jaz muttered. "I—I've seen them before—"

"Just do it!" I said.

The griffin lunged, its wings buzzing like chain saws. Sadie threw her staff, and it morphed into a tiger in midair, slamming into the griffin with its claws unsheathed.

The griffin was not impressed. It knocked the tiger aside, then lashed out with unnatural speed, opening its beak impossibly wide. *SNAP.* The griffin gulped and burped, and the tiger was gone.

"That was my favorite staff!" Sadie cried.

The griffin turned its eyes on me.

I gripped my sword tight. The blade began to glow. I wished I still had Horus's voice inside my head, egging me on. Having a personal war god makes it easier to do stupidly brave things.

"Walt!" I called. "How's it coming with that window?"

"Trying it now," he said.

"H-hold on," Jaz said nervously. "Those are symbols of Sekhmet. Walt, stop!"

Then a lot of things happened at once. Walt opened the window, and a wave of white fire roared over him, knocking him to the floor.

Jaz ran to his side. The griffin immediately lost interest in me. Like any good predator, it focused on the moving target —Jaz—and lunged at her.

I charged after it. But instead of snapping up our friends, the griffin soared straight over Walt and Jaz and slammed into the window. Jaz pulled Walt out of the way while the griffin went crazy, thrashing and biting at the white flames.

It was trying to *attack* the fire. The griffin snapped at the air. It spun, knocking over a display case of *shabti*. Its tail smashed a sarcophagus to pieces.

I'm not sure what possessed me, but I yelled, "Stop it!"

The griffin froze. It turned toward me, cawing in irritation. A curtain of white fire raced away and burned in the corner of the room, almost like it was regrouping. Then I noticed other fires coming together, forming burning shapes that were vaguely human. One looked right at me, and I sensed an unmistakable aura of malice.

"Carter, keep its attention." Sadie apparently hadn't noticed the fiery shapes. Her eyes were still fixed on the griffin as she pulled a length of magic twine from her pocket. "If I can just get close enough—"

"Sadie, wait." I tried to process what was going on. Walt was flat on his back, shivering. His eyes were glowing white, as if the fire had gotten inside him. Jaz knelt over him, muttering a healing spell.

"RAAAWK!" The griffin croaked plaintively as if asking permission—as if it was *obeying* my

order to stop, but didn't like it.

The fiery shapes were getting brighter, more solid. I counted seven blazing figures, slowly forming legs and arms.

Seven figures…Jaz had said something about the symbols of Sekhmet. Dread settled over me as I realized what kind of curse was really protecting the museum. The griffin's release had just been accidental. It wasn't the real problem.

Sadie threw her twine.

"Wait!" I yelled, but it was too late. The magic twine whipped through the air, elongating into a rope as it raced toward the griffin.

The griffin squawked indignantly and leaped after the fiery shapes. The fire creatures scattered, and a game of total annihilation tag was on.

The griffin buzzed around the room, its wings humming. Display cases shattered. Mortal alarms blared. I yelled at the griffin to stop, but this time it did no good.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jaz collapse, maybe from the strain of her healing spell.

"Sadie!" I yelled. "Help her!"

Sadie ran to Jaz's side. I chased the griffin. I probably looked like a total fool in my black pajamas with my glowing sword, tripping over broken artifacts and screaming orders at a giant hummingbird-cat.

Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, half a dozen party guests came around the corner to see what the noise was about. Their mouths fell open. A lady in a peach-colored dress screamed.

The seven white fire creatures shot straight through the wedding guests, who instantly collapsed. The fires kept going, whipping around the corner toward the ballroom. The griffin flew after them.

I glanced back at Sadie, who was kneeling over Jaz and Walt. "How are they?"

"Walt is coming around," she said, "but Jaz is out cold."

"Follow me when you can. I think I can control the griffin."

"Carter, are you *mad*? Our friends are hurt and I've got a flaming scroll stuck to my hand. The window's open. Help me get Jaz and Walt out of here!"

She had a point. This might be our only chance to get our friends out alive. But I also knew what those seven fires were now, and I knew that if I didn't go after them, a lot of innocent people were going to get hurt.

I muttered an Egyptian curse—the cussing kind, not the magic kind—and ran to join the wedding party.

The main ballroom was in chaos. Guests were running everywhere, screaming and knocking over tables. A guy in a tuxedo had fallen into the wedding cake and was crawling around with a plastic bride-and-groom decoration stuck to his rear. A musician was trying to run away with a snare drum on his foot.

The white fires had solidified enough so that I could make out their forms—somewhere between canine and human, with elongated arms and crooked legs. They glowed like superheated gas as they raced through the ballroom, circling the pillars that surrounded the dance floor. One passed straight through a bridesmaid. The lady's eyes turned milky white, and she crumpled to the floor, shivering

and coughing.

I felt like curling into a ball myself. I didn't know any spells that could fight these things, and if one of them touched me…

Suddenly the griffin swooped down out of nowhere, followed closely by Sadie's magic rope, which was still trying to bind it. The griffin snapped up one of the fire creatures in a single gulp and kept flying. Wisps of smoke came out of its nostrils, but otherwise, eating the white fire didn't seem to bother it.

"Hey!" I yelled.

Too late, I realized my mistake.

The griffin turned toward me, which slowed it down just enough for Sadie's magic rope to wrap around its back legs.

"SQUAWWWWK!" The griffin crashed into a buffet table. The rope grew longer, winding around the monster's body while its high-speed wings shredded the table, the floor, and plates of sandwiches like an out-of-control wood chipper.

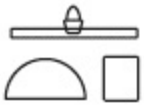
Wedding guests began clearing the ballroom. Most ran for the elevators, but dozens were unconscious or shaking in fits, their eyes glowing white. Others were stuck under piles of debris. Alarms were blaring, and the white fires—six of them now—were still completely out of control.

I ran toward the griffin, which was rolling around, trying in vain to bite at the rope. "Calm down!" I yelled. "Let me help you, stupid!"

"FREEEEK!" The griffin's tail swept over my head and just missed decapitating me.

I took a deep breath. I was mostly a combat magician. I'd never been good at hieroglyph spells, but I pointed my sword at the monster and said: *"Ha-tep."*

A green hieroglyph—the symbol for *Be at peace*—burned in the air, right at the tip of my blade:



The griffin stopped thrashing. The buzzing of its wings slowed. Chaos and screaming still filled the ballroom, but I tried to stay calm as I approached the monster.

"You recognize me, don't you?" I held out my hand, and another symbol blazed above my palm —a symbol I could always summon, the Eye of Horus:

"You're a sacred animal of Horus, aren't you? That's why you obey me."

The griffin blinked at the war god's mark. It ruffled its neck feathers and squawked in complaint, squirming under the rope that was slowly wrapping around its body.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "My sister's a loser. Just hang on. I'll untie you."

Somewhere behind me, Sadie yelled, "Carter!"

I turned and saw her and Walt stumbling toward me, half-carrying Jaz between them. Sadie was still doing her Statue of Liberty impression, holding the flaming scroll in one hand. Walt was on his

feet and his eyes weren't glowing anymore, but Jaz was slumped over like all the bones in her body had turned to jelly.

They dodged a fiery spirit and a few crazy wedding guests and somehow made it across the ballroom.

Walt stared the griffin. "How did you calm it down?"

"Griffins are servants of Horus," I said. "They pulled his chariot in battle. I think it recognized my connection to him."

The griffin shrieked impatiently and thrashed its tail, knocking over a stone column.

"Not very calm," Sadie noticed. She glanced up at the glass dome, forty feet above, where the tiny figure of Khufu was waving at us frantically. "We need to get Jaz out of here *now,*" she said.

"I'm fine," Jaz muttered.

"No, you're not," Walt said. "Carter, she got that spirit out of me, but it almost killed her. It's some kind of sickness demon—"

"A *bau,*" I said. "An evil spirit. These seven are called—"

"The Arrows of Sekhmet," Jaz said, confirming my fears. "They're plague spirits, born from the goddess. I can stop them."

"You can *rest,*" Sadie said.

"Right," I said. "Sadie, get this rope off the griffin and—"

"There's no time." Jaz pointed. The *bau* were getting larger and brighter. More wedding guests were falling as the spirits whipped around the room unchallenged.

"They'll die if I don't stop the *bau,*" Jaz said. "I can channel the power of Sekhmet and force them back to the Duat. It's what I've been training for."

I hesitated. Jaz had never tried such a large spell. She was already weak from healing Walt. But she *was* trained for this. It might seem strange that healers studied the path of Sekhmet, but since Sekhmet was the goddess of destruction, plagues, and famine, it made sense that healers would learn how to control her forces—including *bau.*

Besides, even if I freed the griffin, I wasn't one hundred percent sure I could control it. There was a decent chance it would get excited and gobble us up rather than the spirits.

Outside, police sirens were getting louder. We were running out of time.

"We've got no choice," Jaz insisted.

She pulled her wand and then—much to my sister's shock —gave Walt a kiss on the cheek. "It'll be okay, Walt. Don't give up."

Jaz took something else from her magician's bag—a wax figurine—and pressed it into my sister's free hand. "You'll need this soon, Sadie. I'm sorry I can't help you more. You'll know what to do when the time comes."

I don't think I'd ever seen Sadie at such a loss for words.

Jaz ran to the center of the ballroom and touched her wand to the floor, drawing a circle of protection around her feet. From her bag she produced a small statue of Sekhmet, her patron goddess, and held it aloft.

She began to chant. Red light glowed around her. Tendrils of energy spread out from the circle,

filling the room like the branches of a tree. The tendrils began to swirl, slowly at first, then picking up speed until the magic current tugged at the *bau,* forcing them to fly in the same direction, drawing them toward the center. The spirits howled, trying to fight the spell. Jaz staggered, but she kept chanting, her face beaded with sweat.

"Can't we help her?" Walt asked.

"RAWWWWK!" the griffin cried, which probably meant, *Helloooo! I'm still here!*

The sirens sounded like they were right outside the building now. Down the hall near the elevators, someone was shouting into a megaphone, ordering the last wave of wedding guests to exit the building—like they needed encouragement. The police had arrived, and if we got arrested, this situation was going to be difficult to explain.

"Sadie," I said, "get ready to dispel the rope on the griffin. Walt, you still got your boat amulet?"

"My—? Yeah. But there's no water."

"Just summon the boat!" I dug through my pockets and found my own magic twine. I spoke a charm and was suddenly holding a rope about twenty feet long. I made a loose slipknot in the middle, like a huge necktie, and carefully approached the griffin.

"I'm just going to put this around your neck," I said. "Don't freak."

"FREEEEK!" the griffin said.

I stepped closer, conscious of how fast that beak could snap me up if it wanted to, but I managed to loop the rope around the griffin's neck.

Then something went wrong. Time slowed down. The red swirling tendrils of Jaz's spell moved sluggishly, like the air had turned to syrup. The screams and sirens faded to a distant roar.

You won't succeed, a voice hissed.

I turned and found myself face-to-face with a *bau.*

It hovered in the air a few inches away, its fiery white features almost coming into focus. It seemed to smile, and I could swear I'd seen its face before.

Chaos is too powerful, boy, it said. *The world spins beyond your control. Give up your quest!*

"Shut up," I murmured, but my heart was pounding.

You'll never find her, the spirit taunted. *She sleeps in the Place of Red Sand, but she will die there if you follow your pointless quest.*

I felt like a tarantula was crawling down my back. The spirit was talking about Zia Rashid—the *real* Zia, who I'd been searching for since Christmas.

"No," I said. "You're a demon, a deceiver."

You know better, boy. We've met before.

"Shut up!" I summoned the Eye of Horus, and the spirit hissed. Time sped up again. The red tendrils of Jaz's spell wrapped around the *bau* and pulled it screaming into the vortex.

No one else seemed to have noticed what just happened.

Sadie was playing defense, swatting at *bau* with her flaming scroll whenever they got close. Walt set his boat amulet on the ground and spoke the command word. In a matter of seconds, like one of those crazy expand-in-water sponge toys, the amulet grew into a full-size Egyptian reed boat, lying across the ruins of the buffet table.

With shaking hands, I took the two ends of the griffin's new necktie and tied one end to the boat's prow and one to the stern.

"Carter, look!" Sadie called.

I turned in time to see a flash of blinding red light. The entire vortex collapsed inward, sucking all six *bau* into Jaz's circle. The light died. Jaz fainted, her wand and the Sekhmet statue both crumbling to dust in her hands.

We ran to her. Her clothes were steaming. I couldn't tell if she was breathing.

"Get her into the boat," I said. "We have to get out of here."

I heard a tiny grunt from far above. Khufu had opened the dome. He gestured urgently as searchlights swept the sky above him. The museum was probably surrounded by emergency vehicles.

All around the ballroom, afflicted guests were starting to regain consciousness. Jaz had saved them, but at what cost? We carried her to the boat and climbed in.

"Hold on tight," I warned. "This thing is *not* balanced. If it flips—"

"Hey!" a deep male voice yelled behind us. "What are you—Hey! Stop!"

"Sadie, rope, now!" I said.

She snapped her fingers, and the rope entangling the griffin dissolved.

"GO!" I shouted. "UP!"

"FREEEEK!" The griffin revved its wings. We lurched into the air, the boat rocking crazily, and shot straight for the open dome. The griffin barely seemed to notice our extra weight. It ascended so fast, Khufu had to make a flying leap to get on board. I pulled him into the boat, and we held on desperately, trying not to capsize.

"Agh!" Khufu complained.

"Yeah," I agreed. "So much for an easy job."

Then again, we were the Kane family. This was the easiest day we were going to have for quite a while.

Somehow, our griffin knew the right way to go. He screamed in triumph and soared into the cold rainy night. As we flew toward home, Sadie's scroll burned brighter. When I looked down, ghostly white fires were blazing across every rooftop in Brooklyn.

I began to wonder exactly what we'd stolen—if it was even the right object, or if it would make our problems worse. Either way, I had a feeling we'd finally pushed our luck too far.

SADIE

3. The Ice Cream Man Plots Our Death

ODD HOW EASILY YOU CAN FORGET your hand is on fire.

Oh, sorry. Sadie, here. You didn't think I'd let my brother prattle on forever, did you? Please, no one deserves a curse *that* horrible.

We arrived back at Brooklyn House, and everyone swarmed me because my hand was stuck to a flaming scroll.

"I'm fine!" I insisted. "Take care of Jaz!"

Honestly, I appreciate a bit of attention now and then, but I was hardly the most interesting thing happening. We'd landed on the roof of the mansion, which itself is an odd attraction—a five-story limestone-and-steel cube, like a cross between an Egyptian temple and an art museum, perched atop an abandoned warehouse on the Brooklyn waterfront. Not to mention that the mansion shimmers with magic and is invisible to regular mortals.

Below us, the whole of Brooklyn was on fire. My annoying magic scroll had painted a wide swath of ghostly flames over the borough as we'd flown from the museum. Nothing was actually burning, and the flames weren't hot; but we'd still caused quite a panic. Sirens wailed. People clogged the streets, gawking up at the blazing rooftops. Helicopters circled with searchlights.

If that wasn't exciting enough, my brother was wrangling a griffin, trying to untie a fishing boat from around its neck and keep the beast from eating our trainees.

Then there was Jaz, our real cause for concern. We'd determined she was still breathing, but she seemed to be in some sort of coma. When we opened her eyes, they were glowing white—typically *not* a good sign.

During the boat ride, Khufu had attempted some of his famous baboon magic on her—patting her forehead, making rude noises, and trying to insert jelly beans into her mouth. I'm sure he thought he was being helpful, but it hadn't done much to improve her condition.

Now Walt was taking care of her. He picked her up gently and put her on a stretcher, covering her with blankets and stroking her hair as our other trainees gathered round. And that was fine. Completely fine.

I wasn't at all interested in how handsome his face looked in the moonlight, or his muscular arms in that sleeveless tee, or the fact that he'd been holding hands with Jaz, or…

Sorry. Lost my train of thought.

I plopped down at the far corner of the roof, feeling absolutely knackered. My right hand itched from holding the papyrus scroll so long. The magic flames tickled my fingers.

I felt around in my left pocket and brought out the little wax figure Jaz had given me. It was one of her healing statues, used to expel sickness or curses. Generally speaking, wax figures don't look like anyone in particular, but Jaz had taken her time with this one. It was clearly meant to heal one specific person, which meant it would have more power and would most likely be saved for a life-and-death situation. I recognized the figurine's curly hair, its facial features, the sword pressed into its hands. Jaz had even written its name in hieroglyphs on its chest: *CARTER*.

You'll need this soon, she'd told me.

As far as I knew, Jaz was not a diviner. She couldn't tell the future. So what had she meant? How was I supposed to I know when to use the figurine? Staring at the mini-Carter, I had a horrible feeling that my brother's life had been quite literally placed in my hands.

"Are you all right?" asked a woman's voice.

I quickly put away the figurine.

My old friend Bast stood over me. With her slight smile and glinting yellow eyes, she might've been concerned or amused. It's hard to tell with a cat goddess. Her black hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She wore her usual leopard-skin leotard, as if she were about to perform a backflip. For all I knew, she might. As I said, you never can tell with cats.

"I'm fine," I lied. "Just…" I waved my flaming hand about helplessly.

"Mmm." The scroll seemed to make Bast uncomfortable. "Let me see what I can do."

She knelt next to me and began to chant.

I pondered how odd it was having my former pet cast a spell on me. For years, Bast had posed as my cat, Muffin. I hadn't even realized I had a goddess sleeping on my pillow at night. Then, after our dad unleashed a slew of gods at the British Museum, Bast had made herself known.

She'd been watching over me for six years, she'd told us, ever since our parents released her from a cell in the Duat, where she'd been sent to fight the chaos snake Apophis forever.

Long story, but my mum had foreseen that Apophis would eventually escape his prison, which would basically amount to Doomsday. If Bast continued to fight him alone, she'd be destroyed. However, if Bast were freed, my mum believed she could play an important role in the coming battle with Chaos. So my parents freed her before Apophis could overwhelm her. My mother had died opening, then quickly closing, Apophis's prison; so naturally Bast felt indebted to our parents. Bast had become my guardian.

Now she was also Carter and my chaperone, travel companion, and sometime personal chef (Hint: if she offers you the Friskies du Jour, say no).

But I still missed Muffin. At times I had to resist the urge to scratch Bast behind the ears and feed her crunchy treats, although I was glad she no longer tried to sleep on my pillow at night. That would've been a bit strange.

She finished her chant, and the scroll's flames sputtered out. My hand unclenched. The papyrus dropped into my lap.

"God, thank you," I said.

"Goddess," Bast corrected. "You're quite welcome. We can't have the power of Ra lighting up the city, can we?"

I looked out across the borough. The fires were gone. The Brooklyn night skyline was back to

normal, except for the emergency lights and crowds of screaming mortals in the streets. Come to think of it, I suppose that *was* fairly normal.

"The power of Ra?" I asked. "I thought the scroll was a clue. Is this the actual Book of Ra?"

Bast's ponytail puffed up as it does when she's nervous. I'd come to realize she kept her hair in a ponytail so that her entire head wouldn't explode into a sea urchin shape each time she got startled.

"The scroll is…part of the book," she said. "And I *did* warn you. Ra's power is almost impossible to control. If you insist on trying to wake him, the next fires you set off might not be so harmless."

"But isn't he your pharaoh?" I asked. "Don't you want him awakened?"

She dropped her gaze. I realized how foolish my comment was. Ra was Bast's lord and master. Eons ago, he'd chosen her to be his champion. But he was also the one who'd sent her into that prison to keep his archenemy Apophis occupied for eternity, so Ra could retire with a clear conscience. Quite selfish, if you ask me.

Thanks to my parents, Bast had escaped her imprisonment; but that also meant she'd abandoned her post fighting Apophis. No wonder she had mixed feelings about seeing her old boss again.

"It's best we talk in the morning," Bast said. "You need rest, and that scroll should only be opened in the daylight, when the power of Ra is easier to control."

I stared at my lap. The papyrus was still steaming. "Easier to control…as in, it won't set me on fire?"

"It's safe to touch now," Bast assured me. "After being trapped in darkness for a few millennia, it was just very sensitive, reacting to any sort of energy—magical, electrical, emotional. I've, ah, dialed down the sensitivity so it won't burst into flames again."

I took the scroll. Thankfully, Bast was right. It didn't stick to my hand or light the city on fire.

Bast helped me to my feet. "Get some sleep. I'll let Carter know you're all right. Besides…" She managed a smile. "You've got a big day tomorrow."

Right, I thought miserably. One person remembers, and it's my cat.

I looked over at my brother, who was still trying to control the griffin. It had Carter's shoelaces in its beak and didn't seem inclined to let go.

Most of our twenty trainees were surrounding Jaz, trying to wake her up. Walt hadn't left her side. He glanced up at me briefly, uneasily, then turned his attention back to Jaz.

"Maybe you're right," I grumbled to Bast. "I'm not needed up here."

My room was a lovely place to sulk. The last six years I'd lived in an attic in Gran and Gramps's flat in London, and although I missed my old life, my mates Liz and Emma, and most everything about England, I couldn't deny that my room in Brooklyn was much more posh.

My private balcony overlooked the East River. I had an enormous comfy bed, my own bathroom, and a walk-in closet with endless new outfits that magically appeared and cleaned themselves as needed. The chest of drawers featured a built-in refrigerator with my favorite Ribena drinks, imported from the UK, and chilled chocolates (well, a girl does have to treat herself). The sound system was absolutely bleeding edge, and the walls were magically soundproofed so I could play my music as loud as I wanted without worrying about my stick-in-the-mud brother next door. Sitting on

the dresser was one of the only things I'd brought from my room in London: a beat-up cassette recorder my grandparents had given me ages ago. It was hopelessly old-fashioned, yes, but I kept it around for sentimental reasons. Carter and I had recorded our adventures at the Red Pyramid on it, after all.

I docked my iPod and scrolled through my playlists. I chose an older mix labeled sad, as that's how I felt.

Adele's *19* began playing. God, I hadn't heard that album since…

Quite unexpectedly I began to tear up. I'd been listening to this mix on Christmas Eve when Dad and Carter picked me up for our trip to the British Museum—the night our lives changed forever.

Adele sang as if someone were ripping her heart out. She went on about the boy she fancied, wondering what she must do to make him want her properly. I could relate to that. But last Christmas, the song had made me think of my family as well: my mum, who'd died when I was quite small, and my father and Carter, who traveled the world together, left me in London with my grandparents, and didn't seem to need me in their lives.

Of course I knew it was more complicated than that. There'd been a nasty custody battle involving lawyers and spatula attacks, and Dad had wanted to keep Carter and me apart so we didn't agitate each other's magic before we could handle the power. And yes, we'd all grown closer since then. My father was back in my life a bit more, even if he was the god of the underworld now. As for my mother…well, I'd met her ghost. I suppose that counted for something.

Still, the music brought back all the pain and anger I'd felt at Christmas. I suppose I hadn't gotten rid of it as completely as I'd thought.

My finger hovered over the fast-forward icon, but I decided to let the song play. I tossed my stuff on the dresser—the papyrus scroll, the wax mini-Carter, my magic bag, my wand. I reached for my staff, then remembered I didn't have it anymore. The griffin had eaten it.

"Manky birdbrain," I muttered.

I started changing for bed. I'd plastered the inside of my closet door with photos, mostly of my mates and me from school last year. There was one of Liz, Emma, and me making faces in a photo booth in Piccadilly. We looked so young and ridiculous.

I couldn't believe I might be seeing them tomorrow for the first time in months. Gran and Gramps had invited me to visit, and I had plans to go out with just my mates—at least, that *had* been the plan before Carter dropped his "five-days-to-save-the-world" bombshell. Now, who knew what would happen?

Only two non–Liz-and-Emma pictures decorated my closet door. One showed Carter and me with Uncle Amos the day Amos left for Egypt on his…hmm, what do you call it when someone goes for healing after being possessed by an evil god? Not a holiday, I suppose.

The last picture was a painting of Anubis. Perhaps you've seen him: the fellow with the jackal's head, god of funerals, death, and so on. He's everywhere in Egyptian art—leading deceased souls into the Hall of Judgment, kneeling at the cosmic scales, weighing a heart against the feather of truth.

Why did I have his picture?

[Fine, Carter. I'll admit it, if only to shut you up.]

I had a bit of a crush on Anubis. I know how ridiculous that sounds, a modern girl getting moony-eyed over a five-thousand-year-old dog-headed boy, but that's *not* what I saw when I looked at his

picture. I remembered Anubis as he'd appeared in New Orleans when we'd met face-to-face—a boy of about sixteen, in black leather and denim, with tousled dark hair and gorgeous sad, melted-chocolate eyes. Very much *not* a dog-headed boy.

Still ridiculous, I know. He was a god. We had absolutely nothing in common. I hadn't heard from him once since our adventure with the Red Pyramid, and that shouldn't have surprised me. Even though he'd seemed interested in me at the time and possibly even dropped some hints…. No, surely I'd been imagining it.

The past seven weeks, since Walt Stone had arrived at Brooklyn House, I'd thought I might be able to get over Anubis. Of course, Walt was my trainee, and I wasn't supposed to think of him as a possible boyfriend, but I was fairly sure there'd been a spark between us the first time we saw each other. Now, though, Walt seemed to be pulling away. He was acting so secretive, always looking so guilty and talking to Jaz.

My life was rubbish.

I pulled on my nightclothes while Adele kept singing. Were *all* her songs about not being noticed by boys? Suddenly I found that quite annoying.

I turned off the music and flopped into bed.

Sadly, once I fell asleep my night only got worse.

At Brooklyn House, we sleep with all sorts of magic charms to protect us against malicious dreams, invading spirits, and the occasional urge our souls might get to wander off. I even have a magic pillow to make sure my soul—or *ba,* if you want to get Egyptian about it—stays anchored to my body.

It isn't a perfect system, though. Every so often I can sense some outside force tugging on my mind, trying to get my attention. Or my soul will let me know it has some other place to go, some important scene it needs to show me.

I got one of those sensations immediately when I fell asleep. Think of it as an incoming call, with my brain giving me the option to accept or decline. Most of the time, it's best to decline, especially when my brain is reporting an unknown number.

But sometimes those calls are important. And my birthday *was* tomorrow. Perhaps Dad and Mum were trying to reach me from the underworld. I imagined them in the Hall of Judgment, my father sitting on his throne as the blue-skinned god Osiris, my mum in her ghostly white robes. They might be wearing paper party hats and singing "Happy Birthday" while Ammit the Devourer, their extremely tiny pet monster, jumped up and down, yapping.

Or it could be, just maybe, Anubis calling. *Hi, um, thought you might want to go to a funeral or something?*

Well…it was possible.

So I accepted the call. I let my spirit go where it wanted to take me, and my *ba* floated above my body.

If you've never tried *ba* travel, I wouldn't recommend it—unless of course you fancy turning into a phantom chicken and rafting uncontrollably through the currents of the Duat.

The *ba* is usually invisible to others, which is good, as it takes the form of a giant bird with your normal head attached. Once upon a time, I'd been able to manipulate my *ba*'s form into something less embarrassing, but since Isis vacated my head, I didn't have that ability. Now when I lifted off, I was

stuck in default poultry mode.

The doors of the balcony swung open. A magical breeze swept me into the night. The lights of New York blurred and faded, and I found myself in a familiar underground chamber: the Hall of Ages, in the House of Life's main headquarters under Cairo.

The room was so long, it could've hosted a marathon. Down the middle was a blue carpet that glittered like a river. Between the columns on either side, curtains of light shimmered—holographic images from Egypt's long history. The light changed color to reflect different eras, from the white glow of the Age of the Gods all the way to the crimson light of modern times.

The roof was even higher than the ballroom at the Brooklyn Museum, the vast space lit by glowing orbs of energy and floating hieroglyphic symbols. It looked as if someone had detonated a few kilos of children's cereal in zero gravity, all the colorful sugary bits drifting and colliding in slow motion.

I floated to the end of the room, just above the dais with the pharaoh's throne. It was an honorary seat, empty since the fall of Egypt, but on the step below it sat the Chief Lector, master of the First Nome, leader of the House of Life, and my least favorite magician: Michel Desjardins.

I hadn't seen Monsieur Delightful since our attack on the Red Pyramid, and I was surprised how much he'd aged. He'd only become Chief Lector a few months ago, but his slick black hair and forked beard were now streaked with gray. He leaned wearily on his staff, as if the Chief Lector's leopard-skin cape across his shoulders was as heavy as lead.

I can't say I felt sorry for him. We hadn't parted as friends. We'd combined forces (more or less) to defeat the god Set, but he still considered us dangerous rogue magicians. He'd warned us that if we continued studying the path of the gods (which we had) he would destroy us the next time we met. That hadn't given us much incentive to invite him over for tea.

His face was gaunt, but his eyes still glittered evilly. He studied the bloodred images in the curtains of light as if he were waiting for something.

"Est-il allé?" he asked, which my grammar school French led me to believe meant either "Is he gone?" or possibly "Have you repaired the island?"

Fine…it was probably the first one.

For a moment I was afraid he was talking to me. Then from behind the throne, a raspy voice answered, "Yes, my lord."

A man stepped out of the shadows. He was dressed completely in white—suit, scarf, even white reflective sunglasses. My first thought was: *My god, he's an evil ice cream vendor.*

He had a pleasant smile and chubby face framed in curly gray hair. I might've mistaken him as harmless, even friendly —until he took off his glasses.

His eyes were ruined.

I'll admit I'm squeamish about eyes. A video of retinal surgery? I'll run out of the room. Even the idea of contact lenses makes me cringe.

But the man in white looked as if his eyes had been splashed with acid, then repeatedly clawed by cats. His eyelids were masses of scar tissue that didn't close properly. His eyebrows were burned away and raked with deep grooves. The skin above his cheekbones was a mask of red welts, and the eyes themselves were such a horrible combination of blood red and milky white that I couldn't believe he was able to see.

He inhaled, wheezing so badly, the sound made my chest hurt. Glittering against his shirt was a silver pendant with a snake-shaped amulet.

"He used the portal moments ago, my lord," the man rasped. "Finally, he has gone."

That voice was as horrible as his eyes. If he *had* been splashed with acid, some of it must have gotten into his lungs. Yet the man kept smiling, looking calm and happy in his crisp white suit as if he couldn't wait to sell ice cream to the good little children.

He approached Desjardins, who was still staring at the curtains of light. The ice cream man followed his gaze. I did the same and realized what the Chief Lector was looking at. At the last pillar, just next to the throne, the light was changing. The reddish tint of the modern age was darkening to a deep purple, the color of bruises. On my first visit to the Hall of Ages, I'd been told that the room grew longer as the years passed, and now I could actually see it happening. The floor and walls rippled like a mirage, expanding ever so slowly, and the sliver of purple light widened.

"Ah," said the ice cream man. "It's much clearer now."

"A new age," Desjardins murmured. "A darker age. The color of the light has not changed for a thousand years, Vladimir."

An evil ice cream man named Vladimir? All right, then.

"It is the Kanes, of course," said Vladimir. "You should've killed the elder one while he was in our power."

My *ba* feathers ruffled. I realized he was talking about Uncle Amos.

"No," Desjardins said. "He was under our protection. All who seek healing must be given sanctuary—even Kane."

Vladimir took a deep breath, which sounded like a clogged vacuum cleaner. "But surely now that he has left, we must act. You heard the news from Brooklyn, my lord. The children have found the first scroll. If they find the other two—"

"I know, Vladimir."

"They humiliated the House of Life in Arizona. They made peace with Set rather than destroy him. And now they seek the Book of Ra. If you would allow me to deal with them—"

The top of Desjardins' staff erupted in purple fire. "Who is Chief Lector?" he demanded.

Vladimir's pleasant expression faltered. "You are, my lord."

"And I will deal with the Kanes in due time, but Apophis is our greatest threat. We must divert all our power to keeping down the Serpent. If there is any chance the Kanes can help us restore order —"

"But, Chief Lector," Vladimir interrupted. His tone had a new intensity—an almost magical force to it. "The Kanes are part of the problem. They have upset the balance of Ma'at by awakening the gods. They are teaching forbidden magic. Now they would restore Ra, who has not ruled since the beginning of Egypt! They will throw the world into disarray. This will only help Chaos."

Desjardins blinked, as if confused. "Perhaps you're right.

I…I must think on this."

Vladimir bowed. "As you wish, my lord. I will gather our forces and await your orders to destroy Brooklyn House."

"Destroy…" Desjardins frowned. "Yes, you will await my orders. I will choose the time to

attack, Vladimir."

"Very good, my lord. And if the Kane children seek the other two scrolls to awaken Ra? One is beyond their reach, of course, but the other—"

"I will leave that to you. Guard it as you think best."

Vladimir's eyes were even more horrible when he got excited—slimy and glistening behind those ruined eyelids. They reminded me of Gramps's favorite breakfast: soft-boiled eggs with Tabasco sauce.

[Well, I'm sorry if it's disgusting, Carter. You shouldn't try to eat while I'm narrating, anyway!]

"My lord is wise," Vladimir said. "The children *will* seek the scrolls, my lord. They have no choice. If they leave their stronghold and come into my territory—"

"Didn't I just say we will dispose of them?" Desjardins said flatly. "Now, leave me. I must think."

Vladimir retreated into the shadows. For someone dressed in white, he managed to disappear quite well.

Desjardins returned his attention to the shimmering curtain of light. "A new age…" he mused. "An age of darkness…"

My *ba* swirled into the currents of the Duat, racing back to my sleeping form.

"Sadie?" a voice said.

I sat up in bed, my heart pounding. Gray morning light filled the windows. Sitting at the foot of my bed was…

"Uncle Amos?" I stammered.

He smiled. "Happy birthday, my dear. I'm sorry if I scared you. You didn't answer your door. I was concerned."

He looked back to full health and as fashionably dressed as ever. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, a porkpie hat, and a black wool Italian suit that made him seem a bit less short and stout. His long hair was braided in cornrows decorated with pieces of glittering black stone—obsidian, perhaps. He might've passed for a jazz musician (which he was) or an African American Al Capone (which he wasn't).

I started to ask, "How—?" Then my vision from the Hall of Ages—the implications of what I'd seen—sank in.

"It's all right," Amos said. "I've just returned from Egypt."

I tried to swallow, my breath almost as labored as that ghastly man Vladimir's. "So have I, Amos. And it's *not* all right. They're coming to destroy us."

SADIE

4. A Birthday Invitation to Armageddon

AFTER EXPLAINING MY HORRIBLE VISION, only one thing would do: a proper breakfast.

Amos looked shaken, but he insisted we wait to discuss matters until we'd assembled the entire Twenty-first Nome (as our branch of the House of Life was called). He promised to meet me on the veranda in twenty minutes.

After he'd gone, I showered and considered what to wear. Normally, I would teach Sympathetic Magic on Mondays, which would require proper magician's linen. However, my birthday was *supposed* to be a day off.

Given the circumstances, I doubted Amos, Carter, and Bast would let me go to London, but I decided to think positive. I put on some ripped jeans, my combat boots, a tank top, and my leather jacket—not good for magic, but I was feeling rebellious.

I stuffed my wand and the mini-Carter figure into my magic supply bag. I was about to sling it over my shoulder when I thought—No, I'll not be lugging this about on my birthday.

I took a deep breath and concentrated on opening a space in the Duat. I hate to admit it, but I'm *rubbish* at this trick. It's simply not fair that Carter can pull things out of thin air at a moment's notice, but I normally need five or ten minutes of absolute focus, and even then the effort makes me nauseous. Most of the time, it's simpler just to keep my bag over my shoulder. If I went out with my mates, however, I didn't want to be burdened with it, and I didn't want to leave it behind completely.

At last the air shimmered as the Duat bent to my will. I tossed my bag in front of me, and it disappeared. Excellent —assuming I could figure out how to get it back again later.

I picked up the scroll we'd stolen from Bullwinkle the night before and headed downstairs.

With everyone at breakfast, the mansion was strangely silent. Five levels of balconies faced the Great Room, so normally the place was bustling with noise and activity; but I remembered how empty it had felt when Carter and I first arrived last Christmas.

The Great Room still had many of the same touches: the massive statue of Thoth in the middle, Amos's collection of weapons and jazz instruments along the wall, the snakeskin rug in front of the garage-size fireplace. But you could tell that twenty young magicians lived here now as well. An assortment of remote controls, wands, iPads, snack food wrappers, and *shabti* figurines littered the coffee table. Someone with big feet —probably Julian—had left his muddy trainers on the stairs. And one of our hoodlums—I assumed Felix—had magically converted the fireplace into an Antarctic wonderland, complete with snow and a live penguin. Felix does love penguins.

Magical mops and brooms sped about the house, trying to clean up. I had to duck to avoid getting dusted. For some reason, the dusters think my hair is a maintenance issue.

[No comments from you, Carter.]

As I expected, everyone was gathered on the veranda, which served as our dining area and albino crocodile habitat. Philip of Macedonia splashed around happily in his pool, jumping for bacon strips whenever a trainee tossed him one. The morning was cold and rainy, but the fire in the terrace's magic braziers kept us toasty.

I grabbed a *pain au chocolat* and a cup of tea from the buffet table and sat down. Then I realized the others weren't eating. They were staring at me.

At the head of the table, Amos and Bast both looked grim. Across from me, Carter hadn't touched his plate of waffles, which was *very* unlike him. To my right, Jaz's chair was empty. (Amos had told me she was still in the infirmary, no change.) To my left sat Walt, looking quite good as usual, but I did my best to ignore him.

The other trainees seemed to be in various states of shock. They were a motley assortment of all ages from all over the world. A handful were older than Carter and me—old enough for university, in fact—which was nice for chaperoning the younger ones, but always made me feel a bit uncomfortable when I tried to act as their teacher. The others were mostly between ten and fifteen. Felix was just nine. There was Julian from Boston, Alyssa from Carolina, Sean from Dublin, and Cleo from Rio de Janeiro (yes, I know, Cleo from Rio, but I'm not making it up!). The thing we all had in common: the blood of the pharaohs. All of us were descended from Egypt's royal lines, which gave us a natural capacity for magic and hosting the power of the gods.

The only one who didn't seem affected by the grim mood was Khufu. For reasons we never quite understood, our baboon eats only foods that end in *-o*. Recently he had discovered Jell-O, which he regarded as a miracle substance. I suppose the capital *O* made everything taste better. Now he would eat almost anything encased in gelatin—fruit, nuts, bugs, small animals. At the moment he had his face buried in a quivering red mountain of breakfast and was making rude noises as he excavated for grapes.

Everyone else watched me, as if waiting for an explanation.

"Morning," I muttered. "Lovely day. Penguin in the fireplace, if anyone's interested."

"Sadie," Amos said gently, "tell everyone what you told me."

I sipped some tea to settle my nerves. Then I tried not to sound terrified as I described my visit to the Hall of Ages.

When I was done, the only sounds were the fires crackling in the braziers and Philip of Macedonia splashing in his pool.

Finally nine-year-old Felix asked what was on everyone's mind: "So we're all going to die, then?"

"No." Amos sat forward. "Absolutely not. Children, I know I've just arrived. I've hardly met most of you, but I promise we'll do everything we can to keep you safe. This house is layered with magic protection. You have a major goddess on your side"—he gestured to Bast, who was opening a can of Fancy Feast Tuna Supreme with her fingernails—"and the Kane family to protect you. Carter and Sadie are more powerful than you might realize, and I've battled Michel Desjardins before, if it comes to that."

Given all the trouble we'd had last Christmas, Amos's speech seemed a tad optimistic, but the trainees looked relieved.

"*If* it comes to that?" Alyssa asked. "It sounds pretty certain they'll attack us."

Amos knitted his brow. "Perhaps, but it troubles me that Desjardins would agree to such a foolish move. Apophis is the real enemy, and Desjardins knows it. He should realize he needs all the help he can get. Unless…" He didn't finish the sentence. Whatever he was thinking, it apparently troubled him greatly. "At any rate, if Desjardins decides to come after us, he will plan carefully. He knows this mansion will not fall easily. He can't afford to be embarrassed by the Kane family again. He'll study the problem, consider his options, and gather his forces. It would take several days for him to prepare —time he should be using to stop Apophis."

Walt raised an index finger. I don't know what it is about him, but he has a sort of gravity that draws the group's attention when he's about to speak. Even Khufu looked up from his Jell-O.

"If Desjardins *does* attack us," Walt said, "he'll be well prepared, with magicians who are a lot more experienced than we are. Can he get through our defenses?"

Amos gazed at the sliding glass doors, possibly remembering the last time our defenses had been breached. The results hadn't been good.

"We must make sure it doesn't come to that," he said. "Desjardins knows what we're attempting, and that we only have five days—well, four days, now. According to Sadie's vision, Desjardins is aware of our plan and will try to prevent it out of some misguided belief that we are working for the forces of Chaos. But if we succeed, we'll have bargaining power to make Desjardins back off. "

Cleo raised her hand. "Um…*We* don't know the plan. Four days to do what?"

Amos gestured at Carter, inviting him to explain. That was fine with me. Honestly, I found the plan a bit crazy.

My brother sat up. I must give him credit. Over the last few months, he'd made progress at resembling a normal teenager. After six years of homeschooling and traveling with Dad, Carter had been hopelessly out of touch. He'd dressed like a junior executive, in crisp white shirts and slacks. Now at least he'd learned to wear jeans and T-shirts and the occasional hoodie. He'd let his hair grow out in a curly mess—which looked *much* better. If he kept on improving, the boy might even get a date some day.

[What? Don't poke me. It was a compliment!]

"We're going to wake the god Ra," Carter said, as if it was as easy as getting a snack from the fridge.

The trainees glanced at one another. Carter wasn't known for his sense of humor, but they must've wondered if he was joking.

"You mean the sun god," Felix said. "The old king of the gods."

Carter nodded. "You all know the story. Thousands of years ago, Ra got senile and retreated into the heavens, leaving Osiris in charge. Then Osiris got overthrown by Set. Then Horus defeated Set and became pharaoh. Then—"

I coughed. "Short version, please."

Carter gave me a cross look. "The point is, Ra was the first and most powerful king of the gods. We believe Ra is still alive. He's just asleep somewhere deep in the Duat. If we can wake him—"

"But if he retired because he was senile," Walt said, "wouldn't that mean he's really, *really* senile now?"

I'd asked the same thing when Carter first told me his idea. The last thing we needed was an all-powerful god who couldn't remember his own name, smelled like old people, and drooled in his sleep. And how could an immortal being get senile in the first place? No one had given me a satisfactory answer.

Amos and Carter looked at Bast, which made sense, as she was the only Egyptian god present.

She frowned at her uneaten Fancy Feast. "Ra is the god of the sun. In olden times, he aged as the day aged, then sailed through the Duat on his boat each night and was reborn with the sunrise each morning."

"But the sun isn't reborn," I put in. "It's just the rotation of the earth—"

"Sadie," Bast warned.

Right, right. Myth and science were both true—simply different versions of the same reality, blah, blah. I'd heard that lecture a hundred times, and I didn't want to hear it again.

Bast pointed at the scroll, which I'd set next to my teacup. "When Ra stopped making his nightly journey, the cycle was broken, and Ra faded into permanent twilight—at least, so we think. He meant to sleep forever. But if you could find him in the Duat—and that's a big *if*—it's possible he might be brought back and reborn with the right magic. The Book of Ra describes how this might be done. Ra's priests created the book in ancient times and kept it secret, dividing it into three parts, to be used only if the world was ending."

"If…the world was ending?" Cleo asked. "You mean Apophis is really going to…to swallow the sun?"

Walt looked at me. "Is that possible? In your story about the Red Pyramid, you said Apophis was behind Set's plan to destroy North America. He was trying to cause so much chaos that he could break out of his prison."

I shivered, remembering the apparition that had appeared in the sky over Washington, D.C.—a writhing giant snake.

"Apophis is the *real* problem," I agreed. "We stopped him once, but his prison is weakening. If he manages to escape—"

"He will," Carter said. "In four days. Unless we stop him. And then he'll destroy civilization—everything humans have built since the dawn of Egypt."

That put a chill over breakfast table.

Carter and I had talked privately about the four-day deadline, of course. Horus and Isis had both discussed it with us. But it had seemed like a horrible possibility rather than absolute certainty. Now, Carter sounded sure. I studied his face and realized he'd seen something during the night—possibly a vision even worse than mine. His expression said, *Not here. I'll tell you later.*

Bast was digging her claws into the dining table. Whatever the secret was, she must be in on it.

At the far end of the table, Felix counted on his fingers. "Why four days? What's so special about…*um,* March twenty-first?"

"The spring equinox," Bast explained. "A powerful time for magic. The hours of day and night are exactly balanced, meaning the forces of Chaos and Ma'at can be easily tipped one way or the

other. It's the perfect time to awaken Ra. In fact, it's our *only* chance until the fall equinox, six months from now. But we can't wait that long."

"Because unfortunately," Amos added, "the equinox is also the perfect time for Apophis to escape his prison and invade the mortal world. You can be sure he has minions working on that right now. According to our sources among the gods, Apophis will succeed, which is why we have to awaken Ra first."

I'd heard all this before, but discussing it in the open, in front of all our trainees, and seeing the devastated looks on their faces, it all seemed much more frightening and real.

I cleared my throat. "Right…so *when* Apophis breaks out, he'll try to destroy Ma'at, the order of the universe. He'll swallow the sun, plunge the earth into eternal darkness, and otherwise make us have a very bad day."

"Which is why we need Ra." Amos modulated his tone, making it calm and reassuring for our trainees. He projected such composure, even I felt a little less terrified. I wondered if this was a kind of magic, or if he was just better at explaining Armageddon than I was.

"Ra was Apophis's archenemy," he continued. "Ra is the Lord of Order, whereas Apophis is the Lord of Chaos. Since the beginning of time, these two forces have been in a perpetual battle to destroy one another. If Apophis returns, we have to make sure we have Ra on our side to counteract him. Then we stand a chance."

"A chance," Walt said. "Assuming we can find Ra and wake him, and the rest of the House of Life doesn't destroy us first."

Amos nodded. "But if we can awaken Ra, that would be a feat more difficult than any magician has ever accomplished. It would make Desjardins think twice. The Chief Lector…well, it would seem he's not thinking clearly, but he's no fool. He recognizes the danger of Apophis rising. We must convince him that we're on the same side, that the path of the gods is the only way to defeat Apophis. I would rather do this than fight him."

Personally, I wanted to punch Desjardins in the face and set his beard on fire, but I supposed Amos had a point.

Cleo, poor thing, had gone as green as a frog. She'd come all the way from Brazil to Brooklyn to study the path of Thoth, god of knowledge, and we'd already pegged her as our future librarian; but when the dangers were real, and not just in the pages of books…well, she had a tender stomach. I hoped she could make it to the edge of the terrace if she needed to.

"The—the scroll," she managed, "you said there are two other parts?"

I took the scroll. In the daylight it looked more fragile—brittle and yellow and likely to crumble. My fingers trembled. I could feel magic humming in the papyrus like a low-voltage current. I felt an overwhelming desire to open it.

I began to unroll the cylinder. Carter tensed.

Amos said, "Sadie…"

No doubt they expected Brooklyn to catch fire again, but nothing happened. I spread out the scroll and found it was written in gibberish—not hieroglyphics, not any language I could recognize. The end of the papyrus was a jagged line, as if it had been ripped.

"I imagine the pieces graft together," I said. "It will be readable only when all three sections are combined."

Carter looked impressed. But honestly, I do know *some* things. During our last adventure I'd read a scroll to banish Set, and it had worked much the same way.

Khufu looked up from his Jell-O. *"Agh!"* He put three slimy grapes on the table.

"Exactly," Bast agreed. "As Khufu says, the three sections of the book represent the three aspects of Ra—morning, noon, and night. That scroll there is the spell of Khnum. You'll need to find the other two now."

How Khufu fit all of that into a single grunt, I didn't know; but I wished I could take all my classes from baboon teachers. I'd have middle school and high school finished in a week.

"So the other two grapes," I said, "I mean, scrolls…according to my vision last night, they won't be easy to find."

Amos nodded. "The first section was lost eons ago. The middle section is in the possession of the House of Life. It has been moved many times, and is always kept under tight security. Judging from your vision, I'd say the scroll is now in the hands of Vladimir Menshikov."

"The ice cream man," I guessed. "Who is he?"

Amos traced something on the table—perhaps a protective hieroglyph. "The third-most powerful magician in the world. He's also one of Desjardins' strongest supporters. He runs the Eighteenth Nome, in Russia."

Bast hissed. Being a cat, she was quite good at that. "Vlad the Inhaler. He's got an evil reputation."

I remembered his ruined eyes and wheezing voice. "What happened to his face?"

Bast was about to answer, but Amos cut her off.

"Just realize that he's quite dangerous," he warned. "Vlad's main talent is silencing rogue magicians."

"You mean he's an assassin?" I asked. "Wonderful. And Desjardins just gave him permission to hunt Carter and me if we leave Brooklyn."

"Which you'll *have* to do," Bast said, "if you want to seek the other sections of the Book of Ra. You have only four days."

"Yes," I muttered, "you may have mentioned that. You'll be coming with us, won't you?"

Bast looked down at her Fancy Feast.

"Sadie…" She sounded miserable. "Carter and I were talking and…well, someone has to check on Apophis's prison. We have to know what's going on, how close it is to breaking, and if there's a way to stop it. That requires a firsthand look."

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. "You're going *back* there? After all my parents did to free you?"

"I'll only approach the prison from the outside," she promised. "I'll be careful. I am a creature of stealth, after all. Besides, I'm the only one who knows how to find his cell, and that part of the Duat would be lethal to a mortal. I—I must do this."

Her voice trembled. She'd once told me that cats weren't brave, but going back to her old prison seemed like quite a courageous thing to do.

"I won't leave you undefended," she promised. "I have a…a friend. He should arrive from the Duat by tomorrow. I've asked him to find you and protect you."

"A friend?" I asked.

Bast squirmed. "Well…sort of."

That didn't sound encouraging.

I looked down at my street clothes. A sour taste filled my mouth. Carter and I had a quest to undertake, and it was unlikely we would come back alive. Another responsibility on my shoulders, another unreasonable demand for me to sacrifice my life for the greater good. Happy birthday to me.

Khufu belched and pushed away his empty plate. He bared his Jell-O–stained fangs as if to say *Well, that's settled! Good breakfast!*

"I'll get packed," Carter said. "We can leave in an hour."

"No," I said. I'm not sure who was more surprised—me or my brother.

"No?" Carter asked.

"It's my birthday," I said, which probably made me sound like a seven-year-old brat—but at the moment I didn't care.

The trainees looked astonished. Several mumbled their good wishes. Khufu offered me his empty Jell-O bowl as a present. Felix halfheartedly started singing "Happy Birthday," but no one joined him, so he gave up.

"Bast said her friend won't arrive until tomorrow," I continued. "Amos said it would take Desjardins some time to prepare any sort of attack. Besides, I've been planning my trip to London for ages. I think I have time for *one* bloody day off before the world ends."

The others stared at me. Was I selfish? All right, yes. Irresponsible? Perhaps. So why did I feel so strongly about putting my foot down?

This may come as a shock to you, but I don't like feeling controlled. Carter was dictating what we would do, but as usual he hadn't told me everything. He'd obviously consulted Amos and Bast already and made a game plan. The three of them had decided what was best without bothering to ask me. My one constant companion, Bast, was leaving me to embark on a horribly dangerous mission. And I'd be stuck with my brother on my birthday, tracking down another magical scroll that might set me on fire or worse.

Sorry. No thanks. If I was going to die, then it could wait until tomorrow morning.

Carter's expression was part anger, part disbelief. Normally, we tried to keep things civil in front of our trainees. Now I was embarrassing him. He'd always complained how I rushed into things without thinking. Last night he'd been irritated with me for grabbing that scroll, and I suspected in the back of his mind he blamed me for things going wrong—for Jaz's getting hurt. No doubt he saw this as another example of my reckless nature.

I was quite prepared for a knockdown fight, but Amos interceded.

"Sadie, a visit to London is dangerous." He held up his hand before I could protest. "However, if you must…" He took a deep breath, as if he didn't like what he was about to say. "…then at least promise you'll be careful. I doubt Vlad Menshikov will be ready to move against us so quickly. You should be all right as long as you use no magic, do nothing to attract attention."

"Amos!" Carter protested.

Amos cut him off with a stern look. "While Sadie is gone, we can begin planning. Tomorrow morning, the two of you can begin your quest. I will take over your teaching duties with our trainees,

and oversee the defense of Brooklyn House."

I could see in Amos's eyes he didn't want me to go. It was foolish, dangerous, and rash—in other words, rather typical of me. But I could also sense his sympathy for my predicament. I remembered how fragile Amos had looked after Set took over his body last Christmas. When he'd gone to the First Nome for healing, I knew he'd felt guilty about leaving us alone. Still, it had been the right choice for his sanity. Amos, of all people, knew what it was like to need to get away. If I stayed here, if I left on a quest straightaway without even time to breathe, I felt I would explode.

Besides, I felt better knowing Amos would be covering for us at Brooklyn House. I was relieved to give up my teaching duties for a while. Truth be told, I'm a *horrid* teacher. I simply have no patience for it.

[Oh, be quiet, Carter. You weren't supposed to *agree* with me.]

"Thank you, Amos," I managed.

He stood, clearly indicating that the meeting was over.

"I think that's enough for one morning," he said. "The main thing is for all of you to continue your training, and don't despair. We'll need you in top shape to defend Brooklyn House. We *will* prevail. With the gods on our side, Ma'at will overcome Chaos, as it always has before."

The trainees still looked uneasy, but they stood and began to clear their dishes. Carter gave me one more angry look, then stormed inside.

That was *his* problem. I was determined not to feel guilty. I would not have my birthday ruined. Still, as I stared down at my cold tea and uneaten *pain au chocolat,* I had a horrible feeling I might never sit at this table again.

An hour later I was ready for London.

I'd chosen a new staff from the arsenal and stowed it in the Duat along with my other supplies. I left the magic Bullwinkle scroll with Carter, who wouldn't even talk to me, then checked on Jaz in the infirmary and found her still in a coma. An enchanted washcloth kept her forehead cool. Healing hieroglyphs floated around her bed, but she still looked so frail. Without her usual smile, she seemed like a different person.

I sat next to her and held her hand. My heart felt as heavy as a bowling ball. Jaz had risked her life to protect us. She'd gone up against a mob of *bau* with only a few weeks of training. She'd tapped into the energy of her patron goddess, Sekhmet, just as we'd taught her, and the effort had almost destroyed her.

What had I sacrificed lately? I'd thrown a tantrum because I might miss my birthday party.

"I'm so sorry, Jaz." I knew she couldn't hear me, but my voice quavered. "I just…I'll go mad if I don't get away. We've already had to save the bloody world once, and now I have to do it again…."

I imagined what Jaz would say—something reassuring, no doubt: *It's not your fault, Sadie. You deserve a few hours.*

That just made me feel worse. I should never have allowed Jaz to put herself in danger. Six years ago, my mother had died channeling too much magic. She'd burned up closing the gate to Apophis's prison. I'd known that, and yet I'd allowed Jaz, who had much less experience, to risk her life to save ours.

As I said…I'm a horrid teacher.

Finally I couldn't stand it anymore. I squeezed Jaz's hand, told her to get better soon, and left the infirmary. I climbed to the roof, where we kept our relic for opening portals—a stone sphinx from the ruins of Heliopolis.

I tensed when I noticed Carter at the other end of the roof, feeding a pile of roasted turkeys to the griffin. Since last night, he'd constructed quite a nice stable for the monster, so I guessed it would be staying with us. At least that would keep the pigeons off the roof.

I almost hoped Carter would ignore me. I wasn't in the mood for another argument. But when he saw me, he scowled, wiped the turkey grease off his hands, and walked over.

I braced myself for a scolding.

Instead he grumbled, "Be careful. I got you a birthday gift, but I'll wait until…you come back."

He didn't add the word *alive,* but I thought I heard it in his tone.

"Look, Carter—"

"Just go," he said. "It's not going to help us to argue."

I wasn't sure whether to feel guilty or angry, but I supposed he had a point. We didn't have a very good history with birthdays. One of my earliest memories was fighting with Carter on my sixth birthday, and my cake exploding from the magical energy we stirred up. Perhaps, considering that, I should've left well enough alone. But I couldn't quite do it.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out. "I know you blame me for picking up the scroll last night, and for Jaz's getting hurt, but I feel as if I'm falling apart—"

"You're not the only one," he said.

A lump formed in my throat. I'd been so worried about Carter's being mad at me, I hadn't paid attention to his tone. He sounded absolutely miserable.

"What is it?" I asked. "What happened?"

He wiped his greasy hands on his trousers. "Yesterday at the museum…one of those spirits—one of them talked to me."

He told me about his odd encounter with the flaming *bau,* how time had seemed to slow down and the *bau* had warned Carter our quest would fail.

"He said…" Carter's voice broke. "He said Zia was asleep at the Place of Red Sands, whatever that is. He said if I didn't give up the quest and rescue her, she would die."

"Carter," I said carefully, "did this spirit mention Zia by name?"

"Well, no…"

"Could he have meant something else?"

"No, I'm sure. He meant Zia."

I tried to bite my tongue. Honestly, I did. But the subject of Zia Rashid had become an unhealthy obsession for my brother.

"Carter, not to be unkind," I said, "but the last few months you've been seeing messages about Zia *everywhere.* Two weeks ago, you thought she was sending you a distress call in your mashed potatoes."

"It was a Z! Carved right in the potatoes!"

I held up my hands. "Fine. And your dream last night?"

His shoulders tensed. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on. At breakfast, you said Apophis would escape from his prison on the equinox. You sounded completely certain, as if you'd seen proof. You'd already talked to Bast and convinced her to check Apophis's prison. Whatever you saw…it must've been bad."

"I…I don't know. I'm not sure."

"I see." My irritation rose. So Carter didn't want to tell me. We were back to keeping secrets from each other? Fine.

"We'll continue this later, then," I said. "See you tonight."

"You don't believe me," he said. "About Zia."

"And you don't trust me. So we're even."

We glared at each other. Then Carter turned and stomped off toward the griffin.

I almost called him back. I hadn't meant to be so cross with him. On the other hand, apologizing is not my strong suit, and he *was* rather impossible.

I turned to the sphinx and summoned a gateway. I'd got rather good at it, if I do say so myself. Instantly a swirling funnel of sand appeared in front of me, and I jumped through.

A heartbeat later, I tumbled out at Cleopatra's Needle on the bank of the River Thames.

Six years before, my mother had died here; it wasn't my favorite Egyptian monument. But the Needle was the closest magic portal to Gran and Gramps's flat.

Fortunately, the weather was miserable and there was no one about, so I brushed the sand off my clothes and headed for the Underground station.

Thirty minutes later, I stood on the steps of my grandparents' flat. It seemed so odd to be…home? I wasn't even sure I could call it that anymore. For months I'd been longing for London—the familiar city streets, my favorite shops, my mates, my old room. I'd even been homesick for the dreary weather. But now everything seemed so different, so *foreign*.

Nervously, I knocked on the door.

No answer. I was sure they were expecting me. I knocked again.

Perhaps they were hiding, waiting for me to come in. I imagined my grandparents, Liz, and Emma crouching behind the furniture, ready to jump out and yell "Surprise!"

Hmm…Gran and Gramps crouching and jumping. Not bloody likely.

I fished out my key and unlocked the door.

The living room was dark and empty. The stairwell light was off, which Gran would never allow. She was mortally afraid of falling down stairs. Even Gramps's television was switched off, which wasn't right. Gramps always kept the rugby matches on, even if he wasn't watching.

I sniffed the air. Six in the evening London time, yet no smell of burning biscuits from the kitchen. Gran should've burned at least one tray of biscuits for teatime. It was a tradition.

I got out my phone to call Liz and Emma, but the phone was dead. I *knew* I'd charged the battery.

My mind was just beginning to process a thought—*I am in danger*—when the front door slammed shut behind me. I spun, grabbing for my wand, which I didn't have.

Above me, at the top of the dark stairwell, a voice that was *definitely* not human hissed, "Welcome home, Sadie Kane."

CARTER

5. I Learn to Really Hate Dung Beetles

THANKS A LOT, SADIE.

Hand me the mic right when you get to a good part.

So yeah, Sadie left on her birthday trip to London. The world was ending in four days, we had a quest to complete, and she goes off to party with her friends. Really had her priorities straight, huh? Not that I was bitter, or anything.

On the bright side, Brooklyn House was pretty quiet once she left, at least until the three-headed snake showed up. But first I should tell you about my vision.

Sadie thought I was hiding something from her at breakfast, right? Well, that was sort of true. Honestly, though, what I saw during the night terrified me so badly I didn't want to talk about it, especially on her birthday. I'd experienced some bizarre stuff since I started learning magic, but this took the Nobel Prize for Weird.

After our trip to the Brooklyn Museum, I had a tough time getting to sleep. When I finally managed, I awoke in a different body.

It wasn't soul travel or a dream. I was Horus the Avenger.

I'd shared a body with Horus before. He'd been in my head for almost a week at Christmas, whispering suggestions and otherwise being annoying. During the fight at the Red Pyramid, I'd even experienced a perfect melding of his thoughts and mine. I'd become what Egyptians called the "Eye" of the god—all of his power at my command, our memories mixing together, human and god working as one. But I'd still been in my own body.

This time, things were reversed. I was a guest in Horus's body, standing at the prow of a boat on the magical river that wound through the Duat. My eyesight was as sharp as a falcon's. Through the fog, I could see shapes moving in the water—scaly reptilian backs and monstrous fins. I saw ghosts of the dead drifting along either shore. Far above, the cavern ceiling glistened red, as if we were sailing down the throat of a living beast.

My arms were bronze and muscular, circled with bands of gold and lapis lazuli. I was dressed for battle in leather armor, a javelin in one hand and a *khopesh* in the other. I felt strong and powerful like…well, a god.

Hello, Carter, said Horus, which felt like talking to myself.

"Horus, what's up?" I didn't tell him I was irritated by his intrusion into my sleep. I didn't need to. I was sharing his mind.

I answered your questions, Horus said. *I told you where to find the first scroll. Now you must*

do something for me. There is something I wish to show you.

The boat lurched forward. I grabbed the railing of the navigator's platform. Looking back, I could see the boat was a pharaoh's barque, about sixty feet long and shaped like a massive canoe. In the middle, a tattered pavilion covered an empty dais where a throne might once have sat. A single mast held a square sail that had once been decorated, but was now faded and hanging in shreds. Port and starboard, sets of broken oars dangled uselessly.

The boat must've been abandoned for centuries. The rigging was covered in cobwebs. The lines were rotten. The planks of the hull groaned and creaked as the boat picked up speed.

It is old, like Ra, Horus said. *Do you really want to put this boat back into service? Let me show you the threat you face.*

The rudder turned us into the current. Suddenly we were racing downstream. I'd sailed on the River of Night before, but this time we seemed to be much deeper in the Duat. The air was colder, the rapids faster. We jumped a cataract and went airborne. When we splashed down again, monsters began attacking. Horrible faces rose up—a sea dragon with feline eyes, a crocodile with porcupine bristles, a serpent with the head of a mummified man. Each time one rose up, I raised my sword and cut it down, or speared it with my javelin to keep it away from the boat. But they just kept coming, changing forms, and I knew that if I hadn't been Horus the Avenger—if I had just been Carter Kane trying to deal with these horrors —I would go crazy, or die, or both.

Every night, this was the journey, Horus said. *It was not Ra who fended off the creatures of Chaos. We other gods kept him safe.* We *held back Apophis and his minions.*

We plunged over another waterfall and crashed headlong into a whirlpool. Somehow, we managed not to capsize. The boat spun out of the current and floated toward the shore.

The riverbank here was a field of glistening black stones —or so I thought. As we got closer, I realized they were bug shells—millions and millions of dried-up beetle carapaces, stretching into the gloom as far as I could see. A few living scarabs moved sluggishly among the empty shells, so it seemed like the whole landscape was crawling. I'm not even going to try to describe the smell of several million dead dung beetles.

The Serpent's prison, Horus said.

I scanned the darkness for a jail cell, chains, a pit or something. All I saw was an endless expanse of dead beetles.

"Where?" I asked.

I am showing you this place in a way you can understand, Horus said. *If you were here in person, you would burn to ashes. If you saw this place as it really is, your limited mortal senses would melt.*

"Great," I muttered. "I just love having my senses melted."

The boat scraped against the shore, stirring up a few live scarabs. The whole beach seemed to squirm and writhe.

Once, all these scarabs were alive, Horus said, *the symbol of Ra's daily rebirth, holding back the enemy. Now only a few remain. The Serpent slowly devours his way out.*

"Wait," I said. "You mean…"

In front of me, the shoreline swelled as something underneath pushed upward—a vast shape

straining to break free.

I gripped my sword and javelin; but even with all the strength and courage of Horus, I found myself trembling. Red light glowed beneath the scarab shells. They crackled and shifted as the thing below surged toward the surface. Through the thinning layer of dead bugs, a ten-foot-wide red circle stared up at me—a serpent's eye, full of hatred and hunger. Even in my godly form, I felt the power of Chaos washing over me like lethal radiation, cooking me from the inside out, eating into my soul—and I believed what Horus had said. If I were here in the flesh, I would be burned to ashes.

"It's breaking free." My throat started closing up with panic. "Horus, it's getting out—"

Yes, he said. *Soon…*

Horus guided my arm. I raised my spear and thrust it into the Serpent's eye. Apophis howled with rage. The riverbank trembled. Then Apophis sank beneath the dead scarab shells, and the red glow faded.

But not today, Horus said. *On the equinox, the bonds will weaken enough for the Serpent to break free at last. Become my avatar again, Carter. Help me lead the gods into battle. Together we may be able to stop the rise of Apophis. But if you awaken Ra and he takes back the throne, will he have the strength to rule? Is this boat in any shape to sail the Duat again?*

"Why did you help me find the scroll, then?" I asked. "If you don't want Ra awakened—"

It must be your choice, Horus said. *I believe in you, Carter Kane. Whatever you decide, I will support you. But many of the other gods do not feel the same. They think our chances would be better with me as their king and general, leading them into battle against the Serpent. They see your plan to awaken Ra as foolish and dangerous. It is all I can do to prevent open rebellion. I may not be able to stop them from attacking you and trying to prevent you.*

"Just what we need," I said. "More enemies."

It does not have to be that way, Horus said. *Now you have seen the enemy. Who do you think has the best chance to stand against the Lord of Chaos—Ra or Horus?*

The boat pushed away from the dark shore. Horus released my *ba,* and my consciousness floated back to the mortal world like a helium balloon. The rest of the night, I dreamed about a landscape of dead scarabs, and a red eye glaring from the depths of a weakening prison.

If I acted a little shaken up the next morning, now you know why.

I spent a lot of time wondering why Horus had showed me that vision. The obvious answer: Horus was now king of the gods. He didn't want Ra coming back to challenge his authority. Gods tend to be selfish. Even when they're helpful, they always have their own motives. That's why you have to be careful about trusting them.

On the other hand, Horus had a point. Ra had been old five thousand years ago. No one knew what kind of shape he was in now. Even if we managed to wake him, there was no guarantee he would help. If he looked as bad as his boat, I didn't see how Ra could defeat Apophis.

Horus had asked me who stood the best chance against the Lord of Chaos. Scary truth: when I searched my heart, the answer was none of us. Not the gods. Not the magicians. Not even all of us working together. Horus wanted to be the king and lead the gods into battle, but this enemy was more powerful than anything he'd ever faced. Apophis was as ancient as the universe, and he only feared one enemy: Ra.

Bringing Ra back might not work, but my instincts told me it was our only shot. And frankly, the fact that everyone kept telling me it was a bad idea—Bast, Horus, even Sadie—made me more certain it was the right thing to do. I'm kind of stubborn that way.

The right choice is hardly ever the easy choice, my dad had often told me.

Dad had defied the entire House of Life. He'd sacrificed his own life to unleash the gods because he was sure it was the only way to save the world. Now it was time for me to make the difficult choice.

Fast-forward past breakfast and my argument with Sadie. After she jumped through the portal, I stayed on the roof with no company but my new friend the psychotic griffin.

He screamed *"FREEEEK!"* so much that I decided to call him Freak; plus, it fit his personality. I'd expected him to disappear overnight—to either fly away or return to the Duat—but he seemed happy in his new roost. I'd feathered it with a stack of morning newspapers, all of them featuring headlines about the bizarre sewer gas eruption that had swept through Brooklyn the night before. According to the reports, the gas had ignited ghostly fires across the borough, caused extensive damage at the museum, and overwhelmed some people with nausea, dizziness, and even hallucinations of rhinoceros-size hummingbirds. Stupid sewer gas.

I was tossing Freak more roasted turkeys (jeez, he had an appetite) when Bast appeared next to me.

"Normally, I enjoy birds," she said. "But that thing is disturbing."

"FREEEEK!" said Freak. He and Bast regarded each other as if each was wondering what the other would taste like for lunch.

Bast sniffed. "You're not going to keep it, are you?"

"Well, he's not tied up or anything," I said. "He could leave if he wanted to. I think he likes it here."

"Wonderful," Bast muttered. "One more thing that might kill you while I'm gone."

Personally, I thought Freak and I were getting along pretty well, but I figured nothing I said would reassure Bast.

She was dressed for travel. Over her usual leopard-skin bodysuit she wore a long black coat embroidered with protective hieroglyphs. When she moved, the fabric shimmered, making her fade in and out of sight.

"Be careful," I told her.

She smiled. "I'm a cat, Carter. I can look after myself. I'm more worried about you and Sadie while I'm gone. If your vision is accurate and Apophis's prison is close to breaking…? Well, I'll be back as soon as I can."

There wasn't much I could say to that. If my vision was accurate, we were all in deep trouble.

"I may be out of touch for a couple of days," she continued. "My friend should get here before you and Sadie leave on your quest tomorrow. He'll make sure you two stay alive."

"Can't you at least tell me his name?"

Bast gave me a look that was either amused or nervous—possibly both. "He's a little hard to explain. I'd better let him introduce himself."

With that, Bast kissed me on the forehead. "Take care, my kit."

I was too stunned to respond. I thought of Bast as Sadie's protector. I was just kind of an add-on. But her voice held such affection, I probably blushed. She ran to the edge of the roof and jumped.

I wasn't worried about her, though. I was pretty sure she'd land on her feet.

I wanted to keep things as normal as possible for the trainees, so I led my usual morning class. I called it Magic Problem-Solving 101. The trainees called it Whatever Works.

I gave the trainees a problem. They could solve it any way they wanted. As soon as they succeeded, they could go.

I guess this wasn't much like real school, where you have to stay until the end of the day even if you're just doing busywork; but I'd never *been* to a real school. All those years homeschooling with my dad, I'd learned at my own pace. When I finished my assignments to my dad's satisfaction, the school day was over. The system worked for me, and the trainees seemed to like it, too.

I also thought Zia Rashid would approve. The first time Sadie and I trained with Zia, she'd told us that magic couldn't be learned from classrooms and textbooks. You had to learn by doing. So for Magic Problem-Solving 101, we headed to the training room and blew stuff up.

Today I had four students. The rest of the trainees would be off researching their own paths of magic, practicing enchantments, or doing regular schoolwork under the supervision of our college-age initiates. As our main adult chaperone while Amos was gone, Bast had insisted we keep everyone up-to-speed on the regular subjects like math and reading, although she did sometimes add her own elective courses, such as Advanced Cat Grooming, or Napping. There was a waiting list to get into Napping.

Anyway, the training room took up most of the second floor. It was about the size of a basketball court, which is what we used it for in the evenings. It had a hardwood floor, god statues lining the walls, and a vaulted ceiling with pictures of Ancient Egyptians rocking that sideways walk they always do. On the baseline walls, we'd stuck falcon-headed statues of Ra perpendicular to the floor, ten feet up, and hollowed out their sun-disk crowns so we could use them as basketball hoops. Probably blasphemous—but hey, if Ra didn't have a sense of humor, that was his problem.

Walt was waiting for me, along with Julian, Felix, and Alyssa. Jaz almost always showed up for these sessions, but of course Jaz was still in a coma…and that was a problem none of us knew how to solve.

I attempted to put on my confident teacher-face. "Okay, guys. Today we'll try some combat simulations. We'll start simple."

I pulled four *shabti* figurines from my bag and placed them in different corners of the room. I stationed one trainee in front of each. Then I spoke a command word. The four statuettes grew into full-size Egyptian warriors armed with swords and shields. They weren't super-realistic. Their skin looked like glazed ceramic, and they moved slower than real humans; but they'd be good enough for starters.

"Felix?" I called. "No penguins."

"Aw, c'mon!"

Felix believed that the answer to every problem involved penguins; but it wasn't fair to the birds, and I was getting tired of teleporting them back home. Somewhere in Antarctica, a whole flock

of Magellanic penguins was undergoing psychotherapy.

"Begin!" I yelled, and the *shabti* attacked.

Julian, a big seventh grader who'd already decided on the path of Horus, went straight into battle. He hadn't quite mastered summoning a combat avatar, but he encased his fist in golden energy like a wrecking ball and punched the *shabti*. It flew backward into wall, cracking to pieces. One down.

Alyssa had been studying the path of Geb, the earth god. Nobody at Brooklyn House was an expert in earth magic, but Alyssa rarely needed help. She'd grown up in a family of potters in North Carolina, and had been working with clay since she was a little girl.

She dodged the *shabti*'s clumsy swing and touched it on the back. A hieroglyph glowed against its clay armor:

Nothing seemed to happen to the warrior, but when it turned to strike, Alyssa just stood there. I was about to yell at her to duck, but the *shabti* missed her completely. Its blade hit the floor, and the warrior stumbled. It attacked again, swinging half a dozen times, but its blade never got close to Alyssa. Finally the warrior turned in confusion and staggered to the corner of the room, where it banged its head against the wall and shuddered to a stop.

Alyssa grinned at me. *"Sa-per,"* she explained. "Hieroglyph for *Miss*."

"Nice one," I said.

Meanwhile, Felix found a non-penguin solution. I had no idea what type of magic he might eventually specialize in, but today he went for simple and violent. He grabbed a basketball from the bench, waited for the *shabti* to take a step, then bounced the ball off its head. His timing was perfect. The *shabti* lost its balance and fell over, its sword arm cracking off. Felix walked over and stomped on the *shabti* until it broke to pieces.

He looked at me with satisfaction. "You didn't say we had to use magic."

"Fair enough." I made a mental note never to play basketball with Felix.

Walt was the most interesting to watch. He was a *sau,* a charm maker, so he tended to fight with whatever magic items he had on hand. I never knew what he was going to do.

As for his path, Walt hadn't decided which god's magic to study. He was a good researcher like Thoth, the god of knowledge. He could use scrolls and potions almost as well as Sadie, so he could've chosen the path of Isis. He might have even chosen Osiris, because Walt was a natural at bringing inanimate things to life.

Today he was taking his time, fingering his amulets and considering his options. As the *shabti* approached, Walt retreated. If Walt had a weakness, it was his cautiousness. He liked to think a long time before he acted. In other words, he was Sadie's exact opposite.

[Don't punch me, Sadie. It's true!]

"C'mon, Walt," Julian called. "Kill it already."

"You've got this," Alyssa said.

Walt reached for one of his rings. Then he stepped backward and stumbled over the shards of

Felix's broken *shabti*.

I shouted, "Look out!"

But Walt slipped and fell hard. His *shabti* opponent rushed forward, slashing down with its sword.

I raced to help, but I was too far away. Walt's hand was already rising instinctively to block the strike. The enchanted ceramic blade was almost as sharp as real metal. It should've hurt Walt pretty badly, but he grabbed it, and the *shabti* froze. Under Walt's fingers, the blade turned gray and became webbed with cracks. The gray spread like frost over the entire warrior, and the *shabti* crumbled into a pile of dust.

Walt looked stunned. He opened his hand, which was perfectly fine.

"That was cool!" Felix said. "What amulet was that?"

Walt gave me a nervous glance, and I knew the answer. It wasn't an amulet. Walt had no idea how he'd done it.

That would have been enough excitement for one day. Seriously. But the weirdness was just beginning.

Before either of us could say anything, the floor shook. I thought maybe Walt's magic was spreading into the building, which wouldn't have been good. Or maybe someone below us was experimenting with exploding donkey curses again.

Alyssa yelped. "Guys…"

She pointed to the statue of Ra jutting out from the wall, ten feet above us. Our godly basketball hoop was crumbling.

At first I wasn't sure what I was seeing. The Ra statue wasn't turning to dust like the *shabti*. It was breaking apart, falling to the floor in pieces. Then my stomach clenched. The pieces weren't stone. The statue was turning into scarab shells.

The last of the statue crumbled away, and the pile of dung beetle husks began to move. Three serpent heads rose from the center.

I don't mind telling you: I panicked. I thought my vision of Apophis was coming true right then and there. I stumbled back so quickly, I ran into Alyssa. The only reason I didn't bolt from the room was because four trainees were looking to me for reassurance.

It can't be Apophis, I told myself.

The snakes emerged, and I realized they weren't three different animals. It was one massive cobra with three heads. Even weirder, it unfurled a pair of hawklike wings. The thing's trunk was as thick as my leg. It stood as tall as me, but it wasn't nearly big enough to be Apophis. Its eyes weren't glowing red. They were regular creepy green snake eyes.

Still…with all three heads staring right at me, I can't say I relaxed.

"Carter?" Felix asked uneasily. "Is this part of the lesson?"

The serpent hissed in three-part harmony. Its voice seemed to speak inside my head—and it sounded exactly like the *bau* in the Brooklyn Museum.

Your last warning, Carter Kane, it said. *Give me the scroll.*

My heart skipped a beat. The scroll—Sadie had given it to me after breakfast. Stupid me—I should've locked it up, put it in one of our secure cubbyholes in the library; but it was still in the bag

on my shoulder.

What are you? I asked the snake.

"Carter." Julian drew his sword. "Do we attack?"

My trainees gave no indication that they'd heard either the snake or me speak.

Alyssa raised her hands like she was ready to catch a dodgeball. Walt positioned himself between the snake and Felix, and Felix leaned sideways to see around him.

Give it to me. The serpent coiled to strike, crushing dead beetle shells under its body. Its wings spread so wide, they could've wrapped around us all. *Give up your quest, or I will destroy the girl you seek, just as I destroyed her village.*

I tried to draw my sword, but my arms wouldn't move. I felt paralyzed, as if those three sets of eyes had put me into a trance.

Her village, I thought. Zia's village.

Snakes can't laugh, but this thing's hiss sounded amused. *You'll have to make a choice, Carter Kane—the girl or the god. Abandon your foolish quest, or soon you'll be just another dry husk like Ra's scarabs.*

My anger saved me. I shook off the paralysis and yelled, "Kill it!" just as the serpent opened its mouths, blasting out three columns of flames.

I raised a green shield of magic to deflect the fire. Julian chucked his sword like a throwing-ax. Alyssa gestured with her hand and three stone statues leaped off their pedestals, flying at the serpent. Walt fired a bolt of gray light from his wand. And Felix took off his left shoe and lobbed it at the monster.

Right about then, it sucked to be the serpent. Julian's sword sliced off one of its heads. Felix's shoe bounced off another. The blast from Walt's wand turned the third to dust. Then Alyssa's statues slammed into it, smashing the monster under a ton of stone.

What was left of the serpent's body dissolved into sand.

The room was suddenly quiet. My four trainees looked at me. I reached down and picked up one of the scarab shells.

"Carter, that was part of the lesson, right?" Felix asked. "Tell me that was part of the lesson."

I thought about the serpent's voice—the same voice as the *bau*'s in the Brooklyn Museum. I realized why it sounded so familiar. I'd heard it before during the battle at the Red Pyramid.

"Carter?" Felix looked like he was about to cry. He was such a troublemaker, I sometimes forgot he was only nine years old.

"Yes, just a test," I lied. I looked at Walt, and we came to a silent agreement: *We need to talk about this later.* But first, I had someone else to question. "Class dismissed."

I ran to find Amos.

CARTER

6. A Birdbath Almost Kills Me

AMOS TURNED THE SCARAB SHELL in his fingers. "A three-headed snake, you say."

I felt guilty dumping this on him. He'd been through so much since Christmas. Then he finally got healed and came home, and *boom*—a monster invades our practice room. But I didn't know who else to talk to. I was kind of sorry Sadie wasn't around.

[All right, Sadie, don't gloat. I wasn't *that* sorry.]

"Yeah," I said, "with wings and flamethrower breath. Ever seen something like that before?"

Amos put the scarab shell on the table. He nudged it, as if expecting it to come to life. We had the library to ourselves, which was unusual. Often, the big round chamber was filled with trainees hunting through rows of cubbyholes for scrolls, or sending retrieval *shabti* across the world for artifacts, books, or pizza. Painted on the floor was a picture of Geb the earth god, his body dotted with trees and rivers. Above us, the starry-skinned sky goddess Nut stretched across the ceiling. I usually felt safe in this room, sheltered between two gods who'd been friendly to us in the past. But now I kept glancing at the retrieval *shabti* stationed around the library and wondering if they would dissolve into scarab shells or decide to attack us.

Finally Amos spoke a command word: *"A'max."*

Burn.

A small red hieroglyph blazed over the scarab:

The shell burst into flames and crumbled to a tiny mound of ash.

"I seem to recall a painting," Amos said, "in the tomb of Thuthmose III. It showed a three-headed winged snake like the one you described. But what it means…" He shook his head. "Snakes can be good *or* bad in Egyptian legend. They can be the enemies of Ra, or his protectors."

"This wasn't a protector," I said. "It wanted the scroll."

"And yet it had three heads, which might symbolize the three aspects of Ra. And it was born from the rubble of Ra's statue."

"It wasn't from Ra," I insisted. "Why would Ra want to stop us from finding him? Besides, I recognized the snake's voice. It was the voice of your—" I bit my tongue. "I mean, it was the voice of Set's minion from the Red Pyramid—the one who was possessed by Apophis."

Amos's eyes became unfocused.

"Face of Horror," he remembered. "You think Apophis was speaking to you through this serpent?"

I nodded. "I think he set those traps at the Brooklyn Museum. He spoke to me through that *bau.* If he's so powerful that he can infiltrate this mansion—"

"No, Carter. Even if you're right, it wasn't Apophis himself. If he'd broken out of his prison, it would cause ripples through the Duat so powerful, every magician would feel them. But possessing the minds of minions, even sending them into protected places to deliver a message—that's much easier. I don't think that snake could've done you much harm. It would've been quite weak after breaching our defenses. It was mostly sent to warn you, and scare you."

"It worked," I said.

I didn't ask Amos how he knew so much about possession and the ways of Chaos. Having had his body taken over by Set, the god of evil, had given him an intensive crash course in stuff like that. Now he seemed back to normal, but I knew from my own experience of sharing a mind with Horus: once you hosted a god—whether it was voluntary or not—you were never quite the same. You retained the memories, even some traces of the god's power. I couldn't help noticing that the color of Amos's magic had changed. It used to be blue. Now when he summoned hieroglyphs, they glowed red—the color of Set.

"I'll strengthen the charms around the house," he promised. "It's high time I upgraded our security. I'll make sure Apophis can't send messengers through again."

I nodded, but his promise didn't make me feel much better. Tomorrow, *if* Sadie came back safely, we'd be off on a quest to find the other two scrolls for the Book of Ra.

Sure, we'd survived our last adventure fighting Set, but Apophis was in a totally different league. And we weren't hosting gods anymore. We were just kids, facing evil magicians, demons, monsters, spirits, and the eternal Lord of Chaos. In the plus column, I had a cranky sister, a sword, a baboon, and a griffin with a personality disorder. I wasn't liking those odds.

"Amos," I said, "what if we're wrong? What if awakening Ra doesn't work?"

It had been a long time since I'd seen my uncle smile. He didn't look much like my father, but when he smiled, he got the same crinkles around his eyes.

"My boy, look what you've accomplished. You and Sadie have rediscovered a way of magic that hasn't been practiced in millennia. You've taken your trainees further in two months than most First Nome initiates would get in two years. You've battled gods. You've accomplished more than any living magician has—even me, even Michel Desjardins. Trust your instincts. If I were a betting man, my money would be on you and your sister every time."

A lump formed in my throat. I hadn't gotten a pep talk like that since my dad was still alive, and I guess I hadn't realized how much I needed one.

Unfortunately, hearing Desjardins' name reminded me that we had other problems besides Apophis. As soon as we started our quest, a magical Russian ice cream salesman named Vlad the Inhaler was going to try to assassinate us. And if Vlad was the third-most powerful magician in the world…

"Who's second?" I asked.

Amos frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You said this Russian guy, Vlad Menshikov, is the third-most powerful magician alive.

Desjardins is the most powerful. So who's second? I want to know if we have another enemy to look out for."

The idea seemed to amuse Amos. "Don't worry about that. And despite your past dealings with Desjardins, I would not say he's truly an enemy."

"Tell *him* that," I muttered.

"I did, Carter. We talked several times while I was at the First Nome. I think what you and Sadie accomplished at the Red Pyramid shook him deeply. He knows he could not have defeated Set without you. He still opposes you, but if we had more time, I might be able to convince him…"

That sounded about as likely as Apophis and Ra becoming Facebook buddies, but I decided not to say anything.

Amos passed his hand over the tabletop and spoke a spell. A red holograph of Ra appeared—a miniature replica of the statue in the practice room. The sun god looked like Horus: a falcon-headed man. But unlike Horus, Ra wore the sun disk as a crown and held a shepherd's crook and a war flail—the two symbols of the pharaoh. He was dressed in robes rather than armor, sitting calmly and regally on his throne, as if he were happy to watch others do the fighting. The god's image looked strange in red, glowing with the color of Chaos.

"Something else you must consider," Amos warned. "I don't say this to discourage you, but you asked why Ra might want to stop you from waking him. The Book of Ra was divided for a reason. It was made intentionally difficult to find, so only the worthy would succeed. You should expect challenges and obstacles on your quest. The other two scrolls will be *at least* as well protected as the first. And you should ask yourself: What happens if you wake a god who does not want to be awakened?"

The doors of the library banged open, and I almost jumped out of my chair. Cleo and three other girls came in, chatting and laughing with their arms full of scrolls.

"Here's my research class." Amos flicked his hand, and the holograph of Ra disappeared. "We'll speak again, Carter, perhaps after lunch."

I nodded, though even then I had a suspicion we'd never get to finish our conversation. When I looked back from the door of the library, Amos was greeting his students, casually wiping the ashes of the scarab shell off the table.

I got to my room and found Khufu crashed on the bed, surfing the sports channels. He was wearing his favorite Lakers jersey and had a bowl of Cheetos on his stomach. Ever since our trainees moved in, the Great Room had gotten too noisy for Khufu to watch TV in peace, so he'd decided to become my roommate.

I guess it was a compliment, but sharing space with a baboon wasn't easy. You think dogs and cats shed? Try getting monkey hair off your clothes.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Agh!"

That's pretty much what he always said.

"Great," I told him. "I'll be on the balcony."

It was still cold and rainy outside. The wind off the East River would've made Felix's penguins shiver, but I didn't mind. For first time that day, I could finally be alone.

Since our trainees had come to Brooklyn House, I felt like I was always onstage. I had to act confident even when I had doubts. I couldn't lose my temper with anybody (well, except Sadie once in a while), and when things went wrong, I couldn't complain too loudly. The other kids had come long distances to train with us. Many of them had fought monsters or magicians on the way. I couldn't admit I had no idea what I was doing, or wonder aloud whether this path-of-the-gods thing was going to get us all killed. I couldn't say, *Now that you're here, maybe this wasn't such a good idea.*

But there were plenty of times when that was how I felt. With Khufu occupying my room, the balcony was the only place I could be depressed in solitude.

I looked across the river to Manhattan. It was a great view. When Sadie and I had first arrived at Brooklyn House, Amos had told us that magicians tried to stay out of Manhattan. He said Manhattan had other problems—whatever that meant. And sometimes when I looked across the water, I could swear I was seeing things. Sadie laughed about it, but once I thought I saw a flying horse. Probably just the mansion's magic barriers causing optical illusions, but still, it was weird.

I turned to the only piece of furniture on the balcony: my scrying bowl. It looked like a birdbath—just a bronze saucer on a stone pedestal—but it was my favorite magic item. Walt had made it for me right after he had arrived.

One day, I'd mentioned how nice it would be to know what was going on in the other nomes, and he'd made me this bowl.

I'd seen initiates use them in the First Nome, but they'd always seemed pretty difficult to master. Fortunately, Walt was an expert with enchantments. If my scrying bowl had been a car, it would have been a Cadillac, with power steering, automatic transmission, and a butt warmer. All I had to do was fill it with clean olive oil and speak the command word. The bowl would show me anything, as long as I could visualize it and it wasn't shielded by magic. Places I'd never been to were hard to see. People or places that I'd seen personally or that meant a lot to me—*those* were usually easy.

I'd searched for Zia a hundred times with no luck. All I knew was that her old mentor, Iskandar, had put her into a magical sleep and hidden her somewhere, replacing her with a *shabti* to keep her safe; but I had no idea where the real Zia was sleeping.

I tried something new. I passed my hand over the saucer and imagined the Place of Red Sands. Nothing happened. I'd never been there, had no idea what it looked like apart from possibly being red and sandy. The oil showed me only my own reflection.

Okay, so I couldn't see Zia. I did the next best thing. I concentrated on her secret room in the First Nome. I'd been there only once, but I remembered every detail. It was the first place where I'd felt close to Zia. The surface of the oil rippled and became a magical video feed.

Nothing had changed in the room. Magic candles still burned on the little table. The walls were covered with Zia's photographs—pictures of her family village on the Nile, her mother and father, Zia as a small child.

Zia had told me the story of how her father had unearthed an Egyptian relic and accidentally unleashed a monster on their village. Magicians came to defeat the monster, but not before the entire town was destroyed. Only Zia, hidden by her parents, had survived. Iskandar, the old Chief Lector, had taken her to the First Nome and trained her. He'd been like a father to her.

Then, last Christmas, the gods had been unleashed at the British Museum. One of them—Nephthys—had chosen Zia as a host. Being a "godling" was punishable by death in the First Nome, whether you meant to host the god's spirit or not, so Iskandar had hidden Zia away. He'd probably

meant to bring her back after he sorted things out, but he had died before that could happen.

So the Zia I'd known was a replica, but I had to believe the *shabti* and the real Zia had shared thoughts. Wherever the real Zia was, she would remember me when she woke up. She'd know that we shared a connection—maybe the start of a great relationship. I couldn't accept that I'd fallen in love with nothing but a piece of pottery. And I definitely couldn't accept that Zia was beyond my power to rescue.

I concentrated on the image in the oil. I zoomed in on a photograph of Zia riding on her father's shoulders. She was young in the photo, but you could tell she was going to be beautiful when she grew up. Her glossy black hair was cut in a short wedge, as it had been when I knew her. Her eyes were brilliant amber. The photographer had caught her mid-laugh, trying to cover her dad's eyes with her hands. Her smile radiated playful mischief.

I will destroy the girl you seek, the three-headed snake had said, *just as I destroyed her village.*

I was sure he meant Zia's village. But what did that attack six years ago have to do with Apophis's rising now? If it hadn't been just a random accident—if Apophis had *meant* to destroy Zia's home—then why?

I had to find Zia. It wasn't just personal anymore. She was connected somehow to the coming battle with Apophis. And if the snake's warning was true—if I had to choose between finding the Book of Ra and saving Zia? Well, I'd already lost my mom, my dad, and my old life for the sake of stopping Apophis. I wasn't going to lose Zia too.

I was contemplating how hard Sadie would kick me if she heard me say that, when somebody knocked on the balcony's glass door.

"Hey." Walt stood in the doorway, holding Khufu's hand. "Um, hope you don't mind. Khufu let me in."

"Agh!" Khufu confirmed. He led Walt outside, then jumped on the railing, disregarding the hundred-foot drop to the river below.

"No problem," I said. Not like I had a choice. Khufu loved Walt, probably because he played basketball better than I did.

Walt nodded at the scrying bowl. "How's that working for you?"

The image of Zia's room still shimmered in the oil. I waved my hand over the bowl and changed it to something else. Since I'd been thinking about Sadie, I picked Gran and Gramps's living room.

"Working fine." I turned back to Walt. "How are you feeling?"

For some reason, his whole body tensed. He looked at me like I was trying to corner him. "What do you mean?"

"The training room incident. The three-headed snake. What did you think I meant?"

The tendons in his neck relaxed. "Right…sorry, just a weird morning. Did Amos have an explanation?"

I wondered what I'd said to upset him, but I decided to let it pass. I filled him in on my conversation with Amos. Walt was usually pretty calm about stuff. He was a good listener. But he still seemed guarded, on edge.

When I was done talking, he stepped over to the railing where Khufu was perched. "Apophis let that thing loose in the house? If we hadn't stopped it—"

"Amos thinks the serpent didn't have much power. It was just here to deliver a message and scare us."

Walt shook his head in dismay. "Well…now it knows our abilities, I guess. It knows Felix throws a mean shoe."

I couldn't help but smile. "Yeah. Except that wasn't the ability I was thinking of. That gray light you blasted the snake with…and the way you handled the *shabti* practice dummy, turning it to dust—"

"How did I do it?" Walt shrugged helplessly. "Honest, Carter, I don't know. I've been thinking about it ever since, and…it was just instinctive. At first I thought maybe the *shabti* had some kind of self-destruct spell built into it, and I accidentally triggered it. Sometimes I can do that with magic items—cause them to activate or shut down."

"But that wouldn't explain how you did it again with the serpent."

"No," he agreed. He seemed even more distracted by the incident than I was. Khufu started grooming Walt's hair, looking for bugs, and Walt didn't even try to stop him.

"Walt…" I hesitated, not wanting to push him. "This new ability, turning things to dust—it wouldn't have anything to do with…you know, whatever you were telling Jaz?"

There it was again: that caged-animal look.

"I know," I said quickly, "it's none of my business. But you've been acting upset lately. If there's anything I can do…"

He stared down at the river. He looked so depressed, Khufu grunted and patted him on the shoulder.

"Sometimes I wonder why I came here," Walt said.

"Are you kidding?" I asked. "You're *great* at magic. One of the best! You've got a future here."

He pulled something out of his pocket—one of the dried-up scarabs from the practice room. "Thanks. But the timing…it's like a bad joke. Things are complicated for me, Carter. And the future… I don't know."

I got the feeling he was talking about more than our four-day deadline to save the world.

"Look, if there's a problem…" I said. "If it's something about the way Sadie and I are teaching —"

"Of course not. You've been great. And Sadie—"

"She likes you a lot," I said. "I know she can come on a little strong. If you want her to back off…"

[Okay, Sadie. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. But you aren't exactly subtle when you like somebody. I figured it might be making the guy uncomfortable.]

Walt actually laughed. "No, it's nothing about Sadie. I like her, too. I'm just—"

"Agh!" Khufu barked so loudly, it made me jump. He bared his fangs. I turned and realized that he was snarling at the scrying bowl.

The scene was still Gran and Gramps's living room. But as I studied it more closely, I realized something was wrong. The lights and TV were off. The sofa had been tipped over.

I got a metallic taste in my mouth.

I concentrated on shifting the image until I could see the front door. It had been smashed to

pieces.

"What's wrong?" Walt came up next to me. "What is it?"

"Sadie…" I focused all my willpower on finding her. I knew her so well that I could usually locate her instantly, but this time the oil turned black. A sharp pain stabbed behind my eyes, and the surface of the oil erupted in flames.

Walt pulled me back before my face could get burned. Khufu barked in alarm and tipped the bronze saucer over the railing, sending it hurtling toward the East River.

"What happened?" Walt asked. "I've never seen a bowl do—"

"Portal to London." I coughed, my nostrils stinging with burned olive oil. "Nearest one. Now!"

Walt seemed to understand. His expression hardened with resolve. "Our portal's still on cool-down. We'll need to go back to the Brooklyn Museum."

"The griffin," I said.

"Yeah. I'm coming too."

I turned to Khufu. "Go tell Amos we're leaving. Sadie's in trouble. No time to explain."

Khufu barked and leaped straight over the side of the balcony—taking the express elevator down.

Walt and I bolted from my room, racing up the stairs to the roof.

SADIE

7. A Gift from the Dog-headed Boy

WELL, YOU *TALKED* LONG ENOUGH, brother dear.

As you've been babbling on, everyone's been imagining me frozen in the doorway of Gran and Gramps's flat, screaming "AAHHHHH!"

And the fact that you and Walt bolted off to London, assuming I needed to be rescued—men!

Yes, fair enough. I *did* need help. But that's not the point.

Back to the story: I'd just heard a voice hissing from upstairs: "Welcome home, Sadie Kane."

Of course, I knew this was bad news. My hands tingled as if I'd stuck my fingers in a light socket. I tried to summon my staff and wand, but as I may have mentioned, I'm rubbish at retrieving things from the Duat on short notice. I cursed myself for not coming prepared—but really, I couldn't have been expected to wear linen pajamas and lug around a magic duffel bag for a night on the town with my mates.

I considered fleeing, but Gran and Gramps might be in danger. I couldn't leave without knowing that they were safe.

The stairwell creaked. At the top, the hem of a black dress appeared, along with sandaled feet that weren't quite human. The toes were gnarled and leathery, with overgrown nails like a bird's talons. As the woman descended into full view, I made a very undignified whimpering noise.

She looked a hundred years old, hunched over and emaciated. Her face, earlobes, and neck sagged with folds of wrinkly pink skin, as if she'd melted under a sunlamp. Her nose was a drooping beak. Her eyes gleamed in their cavernous sockets, and she was almost bald—just a few greasy black tufts like weeds pushing through her craggy scalp.

Her dress, however, was absolutely plush. It was midnight black, fluffy, and huge like a fur coat six sizes too big. As she stepped toward me, the material shifted, and I realized that it wasn't fur. The dress was made from black feathers.

Her hands appeared from her sleeves—clawlike fingers beckoning me forward. Her smile revealed teeth like broken bits of glass. And did I mention the smell? Not just old person smell—old *dead* person smell.

"I've been waiting for you," said the hag. "Fortunately, I'm very patient."

I grasped the air for my wand. Of course, I had no luck. Without Isis in my head, I couldn't simply speak words of power anymore. I had to have my tools. My only chance was to stall for time and hope I could collect my thoughts enough to access the Duat.

"Who are you?" I asked. "Where are my grandparents?"

The hag reached the foot of the stairs. From two meters away, her feathery dress appeared to be covered with bits of…egad, was that meat?

"Don't you recognize me, dear?" Her image flickered. Her dress turned into a flowered housecoat. Her sandals became fuzzy green slippers. She had curly gray hair, watery blue eyes, and the expression of a startled rabbit. It was Grandmother's face.

"Sadie?" Her voice sounded weak and confused.

"Gran!"

Her image changed back to the black-feathered hag, her horrible melted face grinning maliciously. "Yes, dear. Your family is blood of the pharaohs, after all—perfect hosts for the gods. Don't make me strain myself, though. Your grandmother's heart isn't what it used to be."

My whole body began to shake. I'd seen possession before, and it was always hideous. But *this*—the idea of some Egyptian hag taking over my poor old Gran—this was horrifying. If I had any blood of the pharaohs, it was turning to ice.

"Leave her alone!" I meant to shout, but I'm afraid my voice was more of a terrified squeak. "Get out of her!"

The hag cackled. "Oh, I can't do that. You see, Sadie Kane, some of us doubt your strength."

"Some of who—the gods?"

Her face rippled, momentarily changing into a horrible bird's head, bald and scaly pink with a long sharp beak. Then she morphed back into the grinning hag. I really wished she would make up her mind.

"I don't bother the strong, Sadie Kane. In the old days, I even protected the pharaoh if he proved himself worthy. But the weak… Ah, once they fall under the shadow of my wings, I never let them go. I wait for them to die. I wait to feed. And I think, my dear, that you will be my next meal."

I pressed my back to the door.

"I know you," I lied. Frantically, I ran down my mental list of Egyptian gods, trying to place the old hag. I still wasn't half as good as Carter at remembering all those odd names. [And no, Carter. That's not a compliment. It simply means you're a bigger nerd.] But after weeks of teaching our trainees, I'd gotten better.

Names held power. If I could figure out my enemy's name, that was a good first step to defeating her. A grisly black bird…A bird that feeds on the dead…

To my amazement, I actually remembered something.

"You're the vulture goddess," I said triumphantly. "Neckbutt, is it?"

The old hag snarled. "Nekhbet!"

All right, so I was close.

"But you're supposed to be a *good* goddess!" I protested.

The goddess spread her arms. They turned into wings—black, matted plumage buzzing with flies and smelling of death. "Vultures are *very* good, Sadie Kane. We remove the sickly and weak. We circle them until they die, then feed on their carcasses, cleaning the world of their stench. You, on the other hand, would bring back Ra, that wizened old carcass of a sun god. You would place a weak pharaoh on the throne of the gods. It goes against nature! Only the strong should live. The dead should

be eaten."

Her breath smelled like roadkill.

Despicable creatures, vultures: without a doubt the most disgusting birds ever. I supposed they served their purpose, but did they have to be so greasy and ugly? Couldn't we have cute fuzzy rabbits that cleaned up roadkill instead?

"Right," I said. "First, get *out* of my Gran. Then, if you're a good vulture, I'll buy you some breath mints."

This must've been a sore subject for Nekhbet. She lunged at me. I dove sideways, clambering over the couch and tipping it in the process. Nekhbet swept Gran's china collection off the sideboard.

"You will die, Sadie Kane!" she said. "I will pick clean your bones. Then the other gods will see you were not worthy!"

I waited for another attack, but she just glared at me from the other side of the sofa. It occurred to me that vultures don't usually kill. They wait for their prey to die.

Nekhbet's wings filled the room. Her shadow fell over me, wrapping me in darkness. I began to feel trapped, helpless, like a small sickly animal.

If I hadn't tested my will against gods before, I might not have recognized this as magic—this insistent nagging in the back of my mind, urging me to give up in despair. But I'd stood against any number of horrid gods from the underworld. I could handle a greasy old bird.

"Nice try," I said. "But I'm not going to lie down and die."

Nekhbet's eyes glittered. "Perhaps it will take some time, my dear, but as I told you, I'm patient. If you won't succumb, your mortal friends will be here soon. What are their names —Liz and Emma?"

"Leave them out of this!"

"Ah, they'll make lovely appetizers. And you haven't even said hello to dear old Gramps yet."

Blood roared in my ears. "Where is he?" I demanded.

Nekhbet glanced at the ceiling. "Oh, he'll be along shortly. We vultures like to follow a nice big predator around, you know, and wait for it to do the killing."

From upstairs came a muffled crash—as if a large piece of furniture had been thrown out a window.

Gramps shouted, "No! No-o-o-o!" Then his voice changed into the roar of a mad animal. "NOOOOOOAHHH!"

The last of my courage melted into my combat boots. "Wh-what—"

"Yes," Nekhbet said. "Babi is waking."

"B-bobby? You've got a god named Bobby?"

"B-A-B-I," the vulture goddess snarled. "You really are quite dense, aren't you, dear?"

The ceiling plaster cracked under the weight of heavy footsteps. Something was tromping toward the stairwell.

"Babi will take good care of you," Nehkbet promised. "And there will be plenty left over for me."

"Good-bye," I said, and I bolted for the door.

Nekhbet didn't try to stop me. She shrieked behind me, "A hunt! Excellent!"

I made it across the street when our front door exploded. Glancing back, I saw something emerge from the ruins and dust—a dark hairy shape much too big to be my grandfather.

I didn't wait for a better look.

I raced around the corner of South Colonnade and plowed straight into Liz and Emma.

"Sadie!" Liz yelped, dropping a birthday present. "What's wrong?"

"No time!" I said. "Come on!"

"Nice to see you, too," Emma grumbled. "Where are you rushing off—"

The creature behind me bellowed, quite close now.

"Explain later," I said. "Unless you'd like to be ripped apart by a god named Bobby, follow me!"

Looking back, I can appreciate just what a *miserable* birthday I was having, but at the time I was too panicked to feel properly sorry for myself.

We ran down South Colonnade, the roaring behind us almost drowned out by Liz and Emma's complaining.

"Sadie!" Emma said. "Is this one of your jokes?"

She'd gotten a bit taller but still looked much the same, with her oversize, glittery glasses and short spiky hair. She wore a black leather miniskirt, a fuzzy pink jumper, and ridiculous platform shoes that she could barely walk in, much less run. Who's that flamboyant rock 'n' roll chap from the '70s—Elton John? If he had an Indian daughter, she might look like Emma.

"It's no joke," I promised. "And for god's sake, lose those shoes!"

Emma looked appalled. "You know how much these cost?"

"Honestly, Sadie," Liz put in. "Where are you dragging us to?"

She was dressed more sensibly in jeans and trainers, a white top and denim jacket, but she looked just as winded as Emma. Tucked under her arm, my birthday present was getting a bit squashed. Liz was a redhead with lots of freckles, and when she got embarrassed or overexerted herself, her pale face became so flushed, her freckles disappeared. Under normal circumstances Emma and I would've teased her about this, but not today.

Behind us, the creature roared again. I looked back, which was a mistake. I faltered to a stop, and my mates ran into me.

For a brief moment, I thought, My god, it's Khufu.

But Khufu wasn't the size of a grizzly bear. He didn't have glittering silver fur, fangs like scimitars, or a look of bloodlust in his eyes. The baboon ravaging Canary Wharf looked like he would eat *anything,* not just foods ending with an *-o,* and would have no difficulty ripping me limb from limb.

The only good news: the activity on the street had momentarily distracted him. Cars swerved to avoid the beast. Pedestrians screamed and ran. The baboon began overturning taxis, smashing shop windows, and causing a general riot. As he got closer to us, I saw a bit of red cloth hanging from his left arm—the remains of Gramps's favorite cardigan. Stuck on his forehead were Gramps's glasses.

Until that moment, the shock hadn't fully hit me. That thing was my *grandfather,* who had never used magic, never done anything to annoy the Egyptian gods.

There were times I didn't like my grandparents, especially when they'd said bad things about my dad, or ignored Carter, or when they'd let Amos take me away last Christmas without a fight. But still, they'd raised me for six years. Gramps had put me on his lap and read me his dusty old Enid Blyton stories when I was small. He'd watched after me at the park and taken me to the zoo countless times. He'd bought me sweets even though Gran disapproved. He may have had a temper, but he was a reasonably harmless old pensioner. He certainly didn't deserve to have his body taken over like this.

The baboon ripped the door off a pub and sniffed inside. Panicked patrons smashed through a window and ran off down the street, still holding their pints. A policeman ran toward the commotion, saw the baboon, then turned and ran the other way, yelling into his radio for reinforcements.

When faced with magical events, mortal eyes tended to short-circuit, sending the brain only images it could understand. I had no idea what these people *thought* they were seeing —possibly an escaped zoo animal or an enraged gunman—but they knew enough to flee. I wondered what the London security cameras would make of the scene later.

"Sadie," Liz said in a very small voice, "what *is* that?"

"Babi," I said. "The bloody god of baboons. He's taken over my granddad. And he wants to kill us."

"Excuse me," Emma said. "Did you just say a baboon god wants to kill us?"

The baboon roared, blinking and squinting as if he had forgotten what he was doing. Maybe he'd inherited Gramps's absentmindedness and bad eyesight. Maybe he didn't realize his glasses were on his head. He sniffed the ground, then bellowed in frustration and smashed the window of a bakery.

I almost believed we'd gotten a bit of good luck. Perhaps we could sneak away. Then a dark shape glided overhead, spreading its black wings and crying, "Here! Here!"

Wonderful. The baboon had air support.

"Two gods, actually," I told my friends. "Now, unless there are any more questions—run!"

This time Liz and Emma needed no encouragement. Emma kicked off her shoes, Liz tossed aside my present—pity, that —and we raced one another down the street.

We zigzagged through alleyways, hugging walls for cover whenever the vulture goddess swooped overhead. I heard Babi roaring along behind us, ruining people's evenings and smashing up the neighborhood; but he seemed to have lost our scent for the moment.

We paused at a T in the road while I considered which way to run. In front of us stood a little church, the sort of ancient building you often find in London—a somber bit of medieval stone wedged between a Caffè Nero and a chemist's shop with neon signs offering selected hair products 3 for £1. The church had a tiny graveyard enclosed with a rusty fence, but I wouldn't have paid it much attention if a voice inside the yard hadn't whispered, "Sadie."

It's a miracle my heart didn't jump out of my throat. I turned and found myself face-to-face with Anubis. He was in his mortal form as a teen boy with dark, windblown hair and warm brown eyes. He wore a black Dead Weather T-shirt and black jeans that fit him extremely well.

Liz and Emma are not known for being smooth around good-looking boys. In fact, their brains

more or less cease to function.

Liz gasped in single syllables that sounded like Lamaze breathing, "Oh—ah—hi—who—what—?"

Emma lost control of her legs and stumbled into me.

I shot both of them a harsh look, then turned to Anubis.

"It's about time someone friendly showed up," I complained. "There's a baboon and a vulture trying to kill us. Would you *please* sort them out?"

Anubis pursed his lips, and I got the feeling that he wasn't there to bring me good news. "Come into my territory," he said, opening the graveyard gate. "We need to talk, and there isn't much time."

Emma stumbled into me again. "Your, *um*, territory?"

Liz gulped. "Who—ah—?"

"Shhh," I told them, trying to stay composed, as if I met hot guys in graveyards every day. I glanced down the street and saw no sign of Babi or Nekhbet, but I could still hear them—the baboon god roaring, the vulture goddess shrieking in my Gran's voice (if Gran had been eating gravel and taking steroids) "This way! This way!"

"Wait here," I told my friends, and I stepped inside the gate.

Immediately, the air turned colder. Mist rose from the soggy ground. The gravestones shimmered, and everything outside the fence went slightly out of focus. Anubis made me feel unbalanced in many ways, of course, but I recognized this effect. We were slipping into the Duat—experiencing the graveyard on two levels at once: Anubis's world and mine.

He led me to a crumbling stone sarcophagus and bowed to it respectfully. "Beatrice, do you mind if we sit?"

Nothing happened. The inscription on the sarcophagus had worn away centuries ago, but I supposed this was Beatrice's final resting place.

"Thank you." Anubis gestured for me to sit. "She doesn't mind."

"What happens if she *does* mind?" I sat down a bit apprehensively.

"The Eighteenth Nome," Anubis said.

"Excuse me?"

"That's where you must go. Vlad Menshikov has the second section of the Book of Ra in the top drawer of his desk, in his headquarters in St. Petersburg. It's a trap, of course. He's hoping to bait you. But if want the scroll, you've got no choice. You should go tonight, before he has time to strengthen his defenses even further. And Sadie, if the other gods found out I was telling you this, I would be in big trouble."

I stared at him. Sometimes he acted so much like a teenager, it was hard to believe he was thousands of years old. I suppose that came from living a sheltered life in the Land of the Dead, unaffected by the passage of time. The boy really needed to get out more.

"You're worried about getting into trouble?" I asked. "Anubis, not that I'm ungrateful, but I've got bigger problems at the moment. Two gods have possessed my grandparents. If you want to lend a hand—"

"Sadie, I can't intervene." He turned up his palms in frustration. "I told you when we first met, this isn't an actual physical body."

"Shame," I mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"I can manifest in places of death, like this churchyard, but there is very little I can do outside my territory. Now, if you were already dead and you wanted a nice funeral, I could help you, but—"

"Oh, thanks!"

Somewhere nearby, the baboon god roared. Glass shattered, and bricks crumbled. My friends called to me, but the sounds were distorted and muffled, as if I was hearing them from underwater.

"If I go on without my friends," I asked Anubis, "will the gods leave them alone?"

Anubis shook his head. "Nekhbet preys on the weak. She knows that hurting your friends will weaken you. That's why she targeted your grandparents. The only way to stop her is by facing her down. As for Babi, he represents the darkest qualities of you primates: murderous rage, uncontrolled strength—"

"We primates?" I said. "Sorry, did you just call me a baboon?"

Anubis studied me with a kind of confused awe. "I'd forgotten how irritating you are. My point was that he will kill you just for the sake of killing."

"And you can't help me."

He gave me a mournful look with those gorgeous brown eyes. "I told you about St. Petersburg."

Lord, he was good-looking, and *so* annoying.

"Well, then, god of pretty much nothing useful," I said, "anything else before I get myself killed?"

He held up his hand. A strange sort of knife materialized in his grasp. It was shaped like a Sweeney Todd razor: long, curvy, and wickedly sharp along one edge, made from black metal.

"Take this," Anubis said. "It will help."

"Have you seen the *size* of the baboon? Am I supposed to give him a shave?"

"This is not to fight Babi or Nekhbet," he said, "but you will need it soon for something even more important. It's a *netjeri* blade, made from meteoric iron. It's used for a ceremony I once told you about—the opening of the mouth."

"Yes, well, if I survive the night, I'll be sure to take this razor and open someone's mouth. Thanks ever so much."

Liz screamed, "Sadie!" Through the mist of the graveyard, I saw Babi a few blocks away, lumbering toward the church. He'd spotted us.

"Take the Underground," Anubis suggested, pulling me to my feet. "There's a station half a block south. They won't be able to track you very well below the earth. Running water is also good. Creatures of the Duat are weakened by crossing a river. If you must battle them, find a bridge over the Thames. Oh, and I told your driver to come get you."

"My driver?"

"Yes. He wasn't planning to meet you until tomorrow, but—"

A red Royal Mail box hurtled through the air and smashed into the building next door. My friends screamed at me to hurry.

"Go," Anubis said. "I'm sorry I can't do more. But happy birthday, Sadie."

He leaned forward and kissed me on the lips. Then he melted into mist and disappeared. The graveyard became normal again—part of the regular, unshimmery world.

I should've been very cross with Anubis. Kissing me without permission—the nerve! But I stood there, paralyzed, staring at Beatrice's crumbling sarcophagus, until Emma yelled, "Sadie, come on!"

My friends grabbed my arms, and I remembered how to run.

We bolted for the Canary Wharf tube station. The baboon roared and smashed through traffic behind us. Overhead, Nekhbet shrieked, "There they go! Kill them!"

"Who was that boy?" Emma demanded as we plunged into the station. "God, he was hot."

"A god," I muttered. "Yes."

I slipped the black razor into my pocket and clambered down the escalator, my lips still tingling from my first kiss.

And if I was humming "Happy Birthday" and smiling stupidly as I fled for my life—well, that was nobody's business, was it?

SADIE

8. Major Delays at Waterloo Station (We Apologize for the Giant Baboon)

THE LONDON UNDERGROUND has lovely acoustics. Sound echoed through the tunnels, so as we descended I could hear the rush of the trains, the musicians playing for coins, and of course the killer baboon god roaring for blood as he pulverized the turnstiles behind us.

What with terrorism threats and stepped-up security, one might've expected a few police to be on hand; but sadly not this time of evening, not at such a relatively small station. Sirens wailed from the street above, but we'd be dead or long gone by the time mortal help arrived. And if the police *did* try to shoot Babi while he possessed Gramps's body—no. I forced myself not to think about that.

Anubis had suggested traveling underground. And if I had to fight, I should find a bridge. I had to stick with that plan.

There wasn't much choice of trains at Canary Wharf. Thankfully, the Jubilee Line was running on time. We made it to the platform, jumped aboard the last carriage as the doors were closing, and collapsed on a bench.

The train lurched away into the dark tunnel. Behind us, I saw no sign of Babi or Nekhbet chasing us.

"Sadie Kane," Emma gasped. "Will you *please* tell us what's going on?"

My poor friends. I'd *never* gotten them into this much trouble, not even when we got shut in the boys' changing room at school. (Long story, which involved a five quid bet, Dylan Quinn's knickers, and a squirrel. Perhaps I'll tell you later.)

Emma's feet were cut and blistered from running barefoot. Her pink jumper looked like mangled poodle fur, and her glasses had lost several rhinestones.

Liz's face was red as a valentine. She'd taken off her denim jacket, which she *never* does, as she's always cold. Her white top was blotted with sweat. Her arms were so freckly, they reminded me of Nut the sky goddess's constellation skin.

Of the two, Emma looked more annoyed, waiting for my explanation. Liz looked horrified, her mouth moving as if she wanted to speak but had lost her vocal cords. I thought she'd make some comment about the bloodthirsty gods chasing us, but when she finally found her voice, she said, "That boy kissed you!"

Leave it to Liz to have her priorities straight.

"I *will* explain," I promised. "I know I'm a horrible friend for dragging you both into this. But please, give me a moment. I need to concentrate."

"Concentrate on what?" Emma demanded.

"Emma, hush!" Liz chided. "She said to let her concentrate." I closed my eyes, trying to calm my nerves.

It wasn't easy, especially with an audience. Without my supplies, however, I was defenseless, and I wasn't likely to get another chance to retrieve them. I thought: *You can do this, Sadie. It's only reaching into another dimension. Only ripping a tear in the fabric of reality.*

I reached out. Nothing happened. I tried again, and my hand disappeared into the Duat. Liz shrieked. Fortunately, I didn't lose my concentration (or my hand). My fingers closed around the strap of my magic bag, and I pulled it free.

Emma's eyes widened. "That's brilliant. How did you do that?"

I was wondering the same thing, actually. Given the circumstances, I couldn't believe I'd managed it on just my second try.

"It's, um…magic," I said.

My mates stared at me, mystified and scared, and the enormity of my problems suddenly came crashing down on me.

A year ago, Liz, Emma, and I would've been riding this train to Funland or the cinema. We would've been laughing at the ridiculous ring tones on Liz's phone or Emma's Photoshopped pictures of the girls we hated at school. The most dangerous things in my life had been Gran's cooking and Gramps's temper when he saw my marks for the term.

Now Gramps was a giant baboon. Gran was an evil vulture. My friends were regarding me as if I'd dropped from another planet, which wasn't far from the truth.

Even with my magic supplies in hand, I had no idea what I was going to do. I didn't have the full power of Isis at my command anymore. If I tried to fight Babi and Nekhbet, I might injure my own grandparents and would likely get myself killed. But if I didn't stop them, who would? Godly possession would eventually burn out a human host. That had almost happened to Uncle Amos, who was a full-fledged magician and knew how to defend himself. Gran and Gramps were old, frail, and quite unmagical. They didn't have much time.

Despair—much worse than the vulture goddess's wings —overwhelmed me.

I didn't realize I was crying until Liz put her hand on my shoulder. "Sadie, dear, we're sorry. It's just a bit…strange, you know? Tell us what's the matter. Let us help."

I took a shaky breath. I'd missed my mates so much. I'd always thought them a bit odd, but now they seemed blissfully *normal*—part of a world that wasn't mine anymore. They were both trying to act brave, but I could tell they were terrified inside. I wished I could leave them behind, hide them, keep them out of harm's way, but I remembered what Nekhbet had said: *They'll make lovely appetizers.* Anubis had warned that the vulture goddess would hunt down my friends and hurt them just to hurt me. At least if they were with me, I could try to protect them. I didn't want to upend their lives the way mine had been, but I owed them the truth.

"This will sound absolutely mad," I warned.

I gave them the shortest version possible—why I'd left London, how the Egyptian gods had escaped into the world, how I'd discovered my ancestry as a magician. I told them about our fight with Set, the rise of Apophis, and our insane idea to awaken the god Ra.

Two stations passed, but it felt so good to tell my friends the story that I rather lost track of time.

When I was done, Liz and Emma looked at one another, no doubt wondering how to gently tell me I was bonkers.

"I know it seems impossible," I said, "but—"

"Sadie, we believe you," Emma said.

I blinked. "You do?"

"'Course we do." Liz's face was flushed, the way she got after several roller coaster rides. "I've never heard you talk so seriously about anything. You—you've changed."

"It's just I'm a magician now, and…and I can't believe how *stupid* that sounds."

"It's more than that." Emma studied my face as if I was turning into something quite frightening. "You seem older. More mature."

Her voice was tinged with sadness, and I realized my mates and I were growing apart. It was as if we stood on opposite sides of a widening chasm. And I knew with gloomy certainty the breach was already too wide for me to jump back across.

"Your boyfriend is amazing," Liz added, probably to cheer me up.

"He's not my…" I stopped. There was no winning that argument with Liz. Besides, I was so mixed up about that bloody jackal Anubis, I didn't know where to begin.

The train slowed. I saw the signs for Waterloo Station.

"Oh, god," I said. "I meant to get off at London Bridge. I need a bridge."

"Can't we backtrack?" Liz asked.

A roar from the tunnel behind us answered that question. Looking back, I saw a large shape with glittering silver fur loping along the tracks. Its foot touched the third rail, and sparks flew; but the baboon god lumbered on, unfazed. As the train braked, Babi started to gain on us.

"No going back," I said. "We'll have to make it to Waterloo Bridge."

"That's half a mile from the station!" Liz protested. "What if it catches us?"

I rummaged through my bag and pulled out my new staff. Instantly it expanded to full length, the lion-carved tip blazing with golden light. "Then I suppose we'll have to fight."

Should I describe Waterloo Station as it was before or after we destroyed it? The main concourse was massive. It had a polished marble floor, loads of shops and kiosks, and a glass-and-girder ceiling high enough so that a helicopter could fly about inside comfortably.

Rivers of people flowed in and out, mixing, separating, and occasionally colliding as they made their way to various escalators and platforms.

When I was small, the station building had rather frightened me. I worried that the giant Victorian clock hanging from the ceiling might fall and crush me. The announcers' voices were much too loud. (I prefer to be the noisiest thing in my environment, thank you very much.) The masses of commuters standing mesmerized under the departure boards, watching for their trains, reminded me of a mob in a zombie movie—which, granted, I shouldn't have watched as a young child, but I was always rather precocious.

At any rate, my mates and I were racing through the main station, pushing our way toward the nearest exit, when a stairwell behind us exploded.

Crowds scattered as Babi climbed from the rubble. Businessmen screamed, dropping their briefcases and sprinting for their lives. Liz, Emma, and I pressed against the side of the Paperchase kiosk to avoid getting trampled by a group of tourists yelling in Italian.

Babi howled. His fur was covered with grime and soot from his run through the tunnels. Gramps's cardigan was ripped to shreds on his arm, but, miraculously, his glasses were still on his head.

He sniffed the air, probably trying to catch my scent. Then a dark shadow passed overhead.

"Where are you going, Sadie Kane?" Nekhbet shrieked. She soared through the terminal, swooping down on the already panicked crowds. "Would you fight by running away? You are not worthy!"

An announcer's calm voice echoed through the terminal: "The 8:02 train for Basingstoke will arrive on platform three."

"ROOOAR!" Babi swatted a bronze statue of some poor famous bloke and knocked his head clean off. A policeman ran forward, armed with a pistol. Before I could yell at him to stop, he fired a shot at Babi. Liz and Emma both screamed. The bullet deflected off Babi's fur as if it were made of titanium, and shattered a nearby McDonald's sign. The officer fainted dead away.

I'd never seen so many people clear out of a terminal so quickly. I considered following them, but decided it would be too dangerous. I couldn't have these insane gods killing loads of innocent people just because I was in their midst; and if we tried to join the exodus, we'd only get stuck or crushed in a stampede.

"Sadie, look!" Liz pointed up, and Emma yelped.

Nekhbet sailed into the ceiling girders and perched there with the pigeons. She glared down at us and cried to Babi, "Here she is, my dear! Here!"

"I wish she'd shut up," I muttered.

"Isis was foolish to choose you!" Nekhbet yelled. "I will feed on your entrails!"

"ROOOOAR!" said Babi, in hearty agreement.

"The 8:14 train for Brighton is delayed," said the announcer. "We apologize for the inconvenience."

Babi had seen us now. His eyes smoldered with primal rage, but I also saw something of Gramps in his expression. The way he furrowed his brow and jutted out his chin—just as Gramps did when he got angry at the telly and yelled at the rugby players. Seeing that expression on the baboon god almost made me lose my nerve.

I wasn't going to die here. I wasn't going to let these two repulsive gods hurt my friends or burn up my grandparents.

Babi lumbered toward us. Now that he'd found us, he didn't seem in any hurry to kill us. He lifted his head and made a deep barking sound to the left and right, as if calling out, summoning friends for dinner. Emma's fingers dug into my arm. Liz whimpered, "Sadie…?"

The crowds had mostly cleared out now. No other police were in sight. Perhaps they'd fled, or perhaps they were all on their way to Canary Wharf, not realizing the problem was now here.

"We're not going to die," I promised my mates. "Emma, hold my staff."

"Your—Oh, right." She took the staff gingerly as if I'd handed her a rocket launcher, which I

suppose it could've been with the proper spell.

"Liz," I ordered, "watch the baboon."

"Watching the baboon," she said. "Rather hard to miss the baboon."

I rummaged through my magic bag, desperately taking inventory. Wand…good for defense, but against two gods at once, I needed more. Sons of Horus, magic chalk—this wasn't the place to draw a protective circle. I had to get to the bridge. I needed to buy time to get out of this terminal.

"Sadie…" Liz warned.

Babi had jumped onto the roof of the Body Shop. He roared, and smaller baboons began to appear from every direction—climbing over the heads of fleeing commuters, swinging down from the girders, popping out of the stairwells and shops. There were dozens of them, all wearing black-and-silver basketball jerseys. Was basketball some sort of international baboon sport?

Until today, I'd been rather fond of baboons. The ones I'd met before, like Khufu and his sociable friends, were the sacred animals of Thoth, god of knowledge. They were generally wise and helpful. I suspected, however, that Babi's troop of baboons was a different sort altogether. They had bloodred fur, wild eyes, and fangs that would've made a saber-toothed tiger feel inadequate.

They began to close in, snarling as they prepared to pounce.

I pulled a block of wax from my bag—no time to fashion a *shabti.* Two *tyet* amulets, the sacred mark of Isis—ah, those might be helpful. Then I found a corked glass vial I'd quite forgotten about. Inside was some murky sludge: my first attempt at a potion. It had been sitting at the bottom of my bag for ages because I'd never been desperate enough to test it.

I shook the potion. The liquid glowed with a sickly green light. Bits of gunk swirled inside. I uncorked it. The stuff smelled worse than Nekhbet.

"What *is* that?" Liz asked.

"Disgusting," I said. "Animation scroll blended with oil, water, and a few secret ingredients. Came out a bit chunky, I'm afraid."

"Animation?" Emma asked. "You're going to summon cartoons?"

"That would be brilliant," I admitted. "But this is more dangerous. If I do it right, I can ingest a great deal of magic without burning myself up."

"And if you do it wrong?" Liz asked.

I handed them each an amulet of Isis. "Hold on to these. When I say *Go,* run for the taxi stands. Don't stop."

"Sadie," Emma protested, "what on earth—"

Before I could lose my nerve, I gagged down the potion.

Above us, Nekhbet cackled. "Give up! You cannot oppose us!" The shadow of her wings seemed to spread over the entire concourse, making the last of the commuters flee in panic and weighing me down with fear. I knew it was only a spell, but still, the temptation to accept a quick death was almost overwhelming.

A few of the baboons got distracted by the smell of food and raided the McDonald's. Several others were chasing a train conductor, beating him with rolled-up fashion magazines.

Sadly, most of the baboons were still focused on us. They made a loose ring around the Paperchase kiosk. From his command station atop the Body Shop, Babi howled—a clear command to

attack.

Then the potion hit my gut. Magic coursed through my body. My mouth tasted like I'd swallowed a dead toad, but now I understood why potions were so popular with ancient magicians.

The animation spell, which had taken me days to write and would normally take at least an hour to cast, was now tingling in my bloodstream. Power surged into my fingertips. My only problem was channeling the magic, making sure it didn't burn me to a crisp.

I called on Isis as best I could, tapping her power to help me shape the enchantment. I envisioned what I wanted, and the right word of power popped into my head: *Protect. N'dah.* I released the magic. A gold hieroglyph burned in front of me:

A wave of golden light rippled through the concourse. The troop of baboons hesitated. Babi stumbled on the Body Shop roof. Even Nekhbet squawked and faltered on the ceiling girders.

All around the station, inanimate objects began to move. Backpacks and briefcases suddenly learned to fly. Magazine racks, gum, sweets, and assorted cold drinks exploded out of the shops and attacked the baboon troop. The decapitated bronze head from the statue shot out of nowhere and slammed into Babi's chest, knocking him backward through the roof of the Body Shop. A tornado of pink *Financial Times* newspapers swirled toward the ceiling. They engulfed Nekhbet, who stumbled blindly and fell shrieking from her perch in a flurry of pink and black.

"Go!" I told my friends. We ran for the exit, weaving around baboons who were much too busy to stop us. One was being pummeled by a half-dozen bottles of sparkling water. Another was fending off a briefcase and several kamikaze BlackBerrys.

Babi tried to rise, but a maelstrom of Body Shop products surged around him—lotions, loofa sponges, and shampoos all battering him, squirting in his eyes, and trying to give him an extreme makeover. He bellowed in irritation, slipped, and fell back into the ruined shop. I doubted my spell would do the gods any permanent damage, but with luck it would keep them occupied for a few minutes.

Liz, Emma, and I made it out of the terminal. With the entire station evacuated, I didn't really expect any cabs to be in the taxi queue, and indeed the curb was empty. I resigned myself to running all the way to Waterloo Bridge, though Emma had no shoes, and the potion had made me queasy.

"Look!" Liz said.

"Oh, well done, Sadie," Emma said.

"What?" I asked. "What did I do?"

Then I noticed the chauffeur—an extremely short, scruffy man standing at the end of the drive in a black suit, holding a placard that read KANE.

I suppose my friends thought I'd summoned him by magic. Before I could tell them differently, Emma said, "Come on!" and they sprinted toward the little man. I had no choice but to follow. I remembered what Anubis had said about sending my "driver" to meet me. I supposed this must be him, but the closer we got, the less eager I was to meet him.

He was shorter than me by half, stouter than my Uncle Amos, and uglier than anyone else on the

planet. His facial features were positively Neanderthal. Under his thick furry mono-brow, one eye was bigger than the other. His beard looked as if it had been used to scrape greasy pots. His skin was poxy with red welts, and his hair looked like a bird's nest that had been set on fire then stomped out.

When he saw me, he scowled, which did nothing to help his appearance.

"About time!" His accent was American. He belched into his fist, and the smell of curry nearly knocked me over. "Bast's friend? Sadie Kane?"

"Um…possibly." I decided to have a serious talk with Bast about her choice of friends. "Just by the way, we have two gods trying to kill us."

The warty little man smacked his lips, clearly unimpressed. "Guess you'll want a bridge, then."

He turned toward the curb and yelled, "BOO!"

A black Mercedes limousine appeared out of nowhere, as if it had been scared into existence.

The chauffeur glanced back at me and arched his brow. "Well? Get in!"

I'd never been in a limousine before. I hope most are nicer than the one we took. The backseat was littered with takeaway curry containers, old fish-and-chip paper, crisps bags, and various dirty socks. Despite this, Emma, Liz, and I crammed together in the back, because none of us dared ride up front.

You may think I was mad to get in a car with a strange man. You're right, of course. But Bast had promised us help, and Anubis had told me to expect a driver. The fact that our promised help was a little man with bad hygiene and a magical limousine did not particularly surprise me. I'd seen stranger things.

Also, I didn't have much choice. The potion had worn off, and the strain of releasing so much magic had made me lightheaded and wobbly-legged. I wasn't sure I could've walked to Waterloo Bridge without passing out.

The chauffeur floored the gas and barreled out of the station. The police had cordoned it off, but our limo swerved around the barricades, past a cluster of BBC news vans and a mob of spectators, and no one paid us any attention.

The chauffeur started whistling a tune that sounded like "Short People." His head barely reached the headrest. All I could see of him was a grubby nest of hair and a set of furry hands on the wheel.

Stuck in the sun visor was an identification card with his picture—sort of. It had been taken at point-blank range, showing only an out-of-focus nose and a hideous mouth, as if he'd been trying to eat the camera. The card read: *Your Driver is BES.*

"You're Bes, I guess?" I said.

"Yes," he said.

"Your car's a mess," Liz muttered.

"If one more person rhymes," Emma grumbled, "I'll throw up."

"Is it Mr. Bes?" I asked, trying to place his name from Egyptian mythology. I was fairly sure they hadn't had a god of chauffeurs. "Lord Bes? Bes the Extremely Short?"

"Just Bes," he grunted. "One *s*. And no, it's NOT a girl's name. Call me Bessie, and I'll have to kill you. As for being short, I'm the dwarf god, so what do you expect? Oh, there's bottled water for you back there if you're thirsty."

I looked down. Rolling about at my feet were two partially empty bottles of water. One had

lipstick on the cap. The other looked as if it had been chewed on.

"Not thirsty," I decided.

Liz and Emma murmured agreement. I was surprised they weren't absolutely catatonic after the evening's events, but then again, they were *my* mates. I didn't hang out with weak-willed girls, did I? Even before I discovered magic, it took a strong constitution and a fair amount of adaptability to be my friend. [And no comment from you, Carter.]

Police vehicles were blocking Waterloo Bridge, but Bes swerved around them, jumped the pavement, and kept driving. The police didn't even blink.

"Are we invisible?" I asked.

"To most mortals." Bes belched. "They're pretty dense, aren't they? Present company excepted, et cetera."

"You're really a god?" Liz asked.

"Huge," Bes said. "I'm *huge* in the world of gods."

"A huge god of dwarves," Emma marveled. "You mean as in Snow White, or—"

"All dwarves." Bes waved his hands expansively, which made me a bit nervous as he took both of them off the wheel. "Egyptians were smart. They honored people who were born unusual. Dwarves were considered extremely magical. So yeah, I'm the god of dwarves."

Liz cleared her throat. "Isn't there a more polite term we're supposed to use nowadays? Like… little person, or vertically challenged, or—"

"I'm not going to call myself the god of vertically challenged people," Bes grumbled. "I'm a dwarf! Now, here we are, just in time."

He spun the car to a stop in the middle of the bridge. Looking behind us, I almost lost the contents of my stomach. A winged black shape was circling over the riverbank. At the end of the bridge, Babi was taking care of the barricade in his own fashion. He was throwing police cars into the River Thames while the officers scattered and fired their weapons, though the bullets seemed to have no effect on the baboon god's steely fur.

"Why are we stopping?" Emma asked.

Bes stood on his seat and stretched, which he could do quite easily. "It's a river," he said. "Good place to fight gods, if I do say so myself. All that force of nature flowing underneath our feet makes it hard to stay anchored in the mortal world."

Looking at him more closely, I could see what he meant. His face was shimmering like a mirage.

A lump formed in my throat. This was the moment of truth. I felt sick from the potion and from fear. I wasn't at all sure I had enough magic to combat those two gods. But I had no choice.

"Liz, Emma," I said. "We're getting out."

"Getting…out?" Liz whimpered.

Emma swallowed. "Are you sure—"

"I know you're scared," I said, "but you'll need to do exactly as I say."

They nodded hesitantly and opened the car doors. The poor things. Again I wished I'd left them behind; but honestly, after seeing my grandparents possessed, I couldn't stand the idea of letting my friends out of my sight.

Bes stifled a yawn. "Need my help?"

"Um…"

Babi was lumbering toward us. Nekhbet circled over him, shrieking orders. If the river was affecting them at all, they didn't show it.

I didn't see how a dwarf god could stand against those two, but I said, "Yes. I need help."

"Right." Bes cracked his knuckles. "So get out."

"What?"

"I can't change clothes with you in the car, can I? I have to put on my ugly outfit."

"Ugly outfit?"

"Go!" the dwarf commanded. "I'll be out in a minute."

It didn't take much encouragement. None of us wanted to see any more of Bes than we had to. We got out, and Bes locked the doors behind us. The windows were heavily tinted, so I couldn't see in. For all I knew Bes would be relaxing, listening to music while we got slaughtered. I certainly didn't have much hope that a wardrobe change was going to defeat Nekhbet and Babi.

I looked at my frightened mates, then at the two gods charging toward us.

"We'll make our last stand here."

"Oh, no, no," Liz said. "I really don't like the term 'last stand.'"

I rummaged through my bag and took out a piece of chalk and the four sons of Horus. "Liz, put these statues at the cardinal points—North, South, and so on. Emma, take the chalk. Draw a circle connecting the statues. We only have a few seconds."

I traded her the chalk for my staff, then had a horrible flash of déjà vu. I'd just ordered my friends into action exactly as Zia Rashid had bossed me the first time we'd faced an enemy god together.

I didn't want to be like Zia. On the other hand, I realized for the first time just how much courage she must've had to stand up to a goddess while protecting two complete novices. I hate to say it, but it gave me a newfound respect for her. I wished I had her bravery.

I raised my staff and wand and tried to focus. Time seemed to slow down. I reached out with my senses until I was aware of everything around me—Emma scrawling with chalk to finish the circle, Liz's heart beating too fast, Babi's massive feet pounding on the bridge as he ran toward us, the Thames flowing under the bridge, and the currents of the Duat flowing around me just as powerfully.

Bast once told me the Duat was like an ocean of magic under the surface of the mortal world. If that was true, then this place—a bridge over moving water—was like a jet stream. Magic flowed more strongly here. It could drown the unwary. Even gods might be swept away.

I tried to anchor myself by concentrating on the landscape around me. London was *my* city. From here I could see everything—the Houses of Parliament, the London Eye, even Cleopatra's Needle on the Victoria Embankment, where my mother had died. If I failed now, so close to where my mother had worked her last magic—No. I couldn't let it come to that.

Babi was only a meter away when Emma finished the circle. I touched my staff to the chalk, and golden light flared up.

The baboon god slammed into my protective force field like it was a metal wall. He staggered backward. Nekhbet swerved away at the last second and flew around us, cawing in frustration.

Unfortunately, the circle's light began to flicker. My mum had taught me at a very young age: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. That applied to magic as well as science. The force of Babi's assault left me seeing black spots. If he attacked again, I wasn't sure I could hold the circle.

I wondered if I should step outside it, make myself the target. If I channeled energy into the circle first, it might maintain itself for a while, even if I died. At least, my friends would live.

Zia Rashid had probably been thinking the same thing last Christmas when she stepped outside her circle to protect Carter and me. She really had been annoyingly brave.

"Whatever happens to me," I told my friends, "stay inside the circle."

"Sadie," Emma said, "I know that tone of voice. Whatever you're planning, don't."

"You can't leave us," Liz pleaded. Then she shouted at Babi in a squeaky voice: "G-go away, you horrible foamy ape! My friend here doesn't want to destroy you, but—but she will!"

Babi snarled. He *was* rather foamy, thanks to the Body Shop attack, and he smelled wonderful. Several different colors of shampoo foam and bath beads were matted in his silver fur.

Nekhbet hadn't fared so well. She perched atop a nearby lamppost, looking as if she'd been assaulted by the entire contents of the West Cornwall Pasty Company. Bits of ham, cheese, and potato splattered her feathery cloak, giving testament to the brave enchanted meatpies that had given their brief lives to delay her. Her hair was decorated with plastic forks, napkins, and bits of pink newsprint. She looked quite keen to tear me to shreds.

The only good news: Babi's minions evidently hadn't made it out of the train station. I imagined a troop of pasty-splattered baboons shoved against police cars and handcuffed. It lifted my spirits somewhat.

Nekhbet snarled. "You surprised us at the station, Sadie Kane. I'll admit that was well done. And bringing us to this bridge—a good try. But we are not so weak. You don't have the strength to fight us any longer. If you cannot defeat us, you have no business raising Ra."

"You lot should be helping me," I said. "Not trying to stop me."

"Uhh!" Babi barked.

"Indeed," agreed the vulture goddess. "The strong survive without help. The weak must be killed and eaten. Which are you, child? Be honest."

The truth? I was about to drop. The bridge seemed to be spinning beneath me. Sirens wailed on both banks of the river. More police had arrived at the barricades, but for now they made no effort to advance.

Babi bared his fangs. He was so close, I could smell his shampooed fur and his horrid breath. Then I looked at Gramps's glasses still stuck on his head, and all my anger came back.

"Try me," I said. "I follow the path of Isis. Cross me, and I'll destroy you."

I managed to light my staff. Babi stepped back. Nekhbet fluttered on her lamppost. Their forms shimmered briefly. The river *was* weakening them, loosening their connection to the mortal world like interference on a mobile phone line. But it wasn't enough.

Nekhbet must've seen the desperation in my face. She was a vulture. She specialized in knowing when her prey was finished.

"A good last effort, child," she said, almost with appreciation, "but you have nothing left. Babi,

attack!"

The baboon god reared up on his back legs. I got ready to charge and deliver one final burst of energy—to tap into my own life source and hopefully vaporize the gods. I had to make sure Liz and Emma survived.

Then the limo's door opened behind me. Bes announced: "No one is attacking anyone! Except me, of course."

Nekhbet shrieked in alarm. I turned to see what was going on. Immediately, I wished I could burn my eyes out of my head.

Liz made a gagging sound. "Lord, no! That's *wrong*!"

"Agh!" Emma shouted, in perfect baboon-speak. "Make him stop!"

Bes had indeed put on his ugly outfit. He climbed onto the roof of the limo and stood there, legs planted, arms akimbo, like Superman—except with only the underwear.

For those faint of heart, I won't go into great detail, but Bes, all of a meter tall, was showing off his disgusting physique —his potbelly, hairy limbs, awful feet, gross flabby bits—and wearing only a blue Speedo. Imagine the worst looking person you've ever seen on a public beach—the person for whom swimwear should be illegal. Bes looked worse than that.

I wasn't sure what to say except: "Put on some clothes!"

Bes laughed—the sort of guffaw that says *Ha-ha! I'm amazing!*

"Not until they leave," he said. "Or I'll be forced to scare them back to the Duat."

"This is not your affair, dwarf god!" Nekhbet snarled, averting her eyes from his horribleness. "Go away!"

"These children are under my protection," Bes insisted.

"I don't know you," I said. "I never met you before today."

"Nonsense. You expressly asked for my protection."

"I didn't ask for the Speedo Patrol!"

Bes leaped off the limo and landed in front of my circle, placing himself between Babi and me. The dwarf was even more horrible from behind. His back was so hairy it looked like a mink coat. And on the back of his Speedo was printed DWARF PRIDE.

Bes and Babi circled each other like wrestlers. The baboon god swiped at Bes, but the dwarf was agile. He scrambled up Babi's chest and head-butted him in the nose. Babi staggered backward as the dwarf continued pounding away, using his face as a deadly weapon.

"Don't hurt him!" I yelled. "It's my Gramps in there!"

Babi slumped against the railing. He blinked, trying to regain his bearings, but Bes breathed on him, and the smell of curry must've been too much. The baboon's knees buckled. His body shimmered and began to shrink. He crumpled on the pavement and melted into a stocky gray-haired pensioner in a tattered cardigan.

"Gramps!" I couldn't stand it. I left the protective circle and ran to his side.

"He'll be fine," Bes promised. Then he turned toward the vulture goddess. "Now it's your turn, Nekhbet. *Leave*."

"I stole this body fair and square!" she wailed. "I like it in here!"

"You asked for it." Bes rubbed his hands, took a deep breath, and did something I will never be able to erase from my memory.

If I simply said he made a face and yelled BOO, that would be technically correct, but it wouldn't begin to convey the horror.

His head swelled. His jaw unhinged until his mouth was four times too big. His eyes bulged like grapefruits. His hair stuck straight up like Bast's. He shook his face and waggled his slimy green tongue and roared BOOOO! so loudly, the sound rolled across the Thames like a cannon shot. This blast of pure ugly blew the feathers off Nekhbet's cloak and drained all the color from her face. It ripped away the essence of the goddess like tissue paper in a storm. The only thing left was a dazed old woman in a flower-print dress, squatting on the lamppost.

"Oh, dear…" Gran fainted.

Bes jumped up and caught her before she could topple into the river. The dwarf's face went back to normal—well, normally *ugly,* at least—as he eased Gran onto the pavement next to Gramps.

"Thank you," I told Bes. "Now, will you please put on some clothes?"

He gave me a toothy grin, which I could have lived without. "You're all right, Sadie Kane. I see why Bast likes you."

"Sadie?" my grandfather groaned, his eyelids fluttering open.

"I'm here, Gramps." I stroked his forehead. "How do you feel?"

"Strange craving for mangoes." He went cross-eyed. "And possibly insects. You…you saved us?"

"Not really," I admitted. "My friend here—"

"Certainly she saved you," Bes said. "Brave girl you have here. Quite a magician."

Gramps focused on Bes and scowled. "Bloody Egyptian gods in their bloody revealing swimwear. This is why we don't *do* magic."

I sighed with relief. Once Gramps started complaining, I knew he was going to be all right. Gran was still passed out, but her breathing seemed steady. The color was coming back into her cheeks.

"We should go," Bes said. "The mortals are ready to storm the bridge."

I glanced toward the barricades and saw what he meant. An assault team was gathering—heavily armored men with rifles, grenade launchers, and probably many other fun toys that could kill us.

"Liz, Emma!" I called. "Help me with my grandparents."

My friends ran over and started to help Gramps sit up, but Bes said, "They can't come."

"What?" I demanded. "But you just said—"

"They're mortals," Bes said. "They don't belong on your quest. If we're going to get the second scroll from Vlad Menshikov, we need to leave *now.*"

"You know about that?" Then I remembered that he'd spoken with Anubis.

"Your grandparents and friends are in less danger here," Bes said. "The police will question them, but they won't see old people and children as a threat."

"We're not children," Emma grumbled.

"Vultures…" Gran whispered in her sleep. "Meatpies…"

Gramps coughed. "The dwarf is right, Sadie. *Go.* I'll be tiptop in a moment, though it's a pity

that baboon chap couldn't leave me some of his power. Haven't felt that strong in ages."

I looked at my bedraggled grandparents and friends. My heart felt it was being stretched in more directions than Bes's face. I realized the dwarf was right: they'd be safer here facing an assault team than going with us. And I realized, too, that they didn't belong on a magic quest. My grandparents had chosen long ago not to use their ancestral abilities. And my friends were just mortals—brave, mad, ridiculous, wonderful mortals. But they couldn't go where I had to go.

"Sadie, it's fine." Emma adjusted her broken glasses and tried for a smile. "We can handle the police. Won't be the first time we've had to do some quick talking, eh?"

"We'll take care of your gran and gramps," Liz promised.

"Don't need taking care of," Gramps complained. Then he broke down in a fit of coughing. "Just go, my dear. That baboon god was in my head. I can tell you—he means to destroy you. Finish your quest before he comes after you again. I couldn't even stop him. I couldn't…" He looked resentfully at his shaky old hands. "I never would've forgiven myself. Now, off with you!"

"I'm sorry," I told them all. "I didn't mean—"

"Sorry?" Emma demanded. "Sadie Kane, that was the most *brilliant* birthday party ever! Now, go!"

She and Liz both hugged me, and before I could start crying, Bes shepherded me into the Mercedes.

We drove north toward the Victoria Embankment. We were almost to the barricades when Bes slowed down.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Can't we go past invisibly?"

"It's not the mortals I'm worried about." He pointed.

All the police, reporters, and spectators around the barricades had fallen asleep. Several military-types in body armor were curled on the pavement, cuddling their assault rifles like teddy bears.

Standing in front of the barricades, blocking our car, were Carter and Walt. They were disheveled and breathing heavily, as if they'd run here all the way from Brooklyn. They both had wands at the ready. Carter stepped forward, pointing his sword at the windshield.

"Let her go!" he yelled at Bes. "Or I'll destroy you!"

Bes glanced back at me. "Should I frighten him?"

"No!" I said. That was something I *didn't* need to see again. "I'll handle it."

I stepped out of the limo. "Hello, boys. Brilliant timing."

Walt and Carter frowned.

"You're not in danger?" Walt asked me.

"Not anymore."

Carter lowered his sword reluctantly. "You mean the ugly guy—"

"Is a friend," I said. "Bast's friend. He's also our driver."

Carter looked equal parts confused, annoyed, and uneasy, which made a satisfying ending to my birthday party.

"Driver to where?" he asked.

“Russia, of course,” I said. “Hop in.”

CARTER

9. We Get a Vertically Challenged Tour of Russia

AS USUAL, SADIE LEFT OUT some important details, like how Walt and I nearly killed ourselves trying to find her.

It wasn't fun, flying to the Brooklyn Museum. We had to hang from a rope under the griffin's belly like a couple of Tarzans, dodging policemen, emergency workers, city officials, and several old ladies who chased after us with umbrellas screaming, "There's the hummingbird! Kill it!"

Once we managed to open a portal, I wanted to take Freak through with us, but the gate of swirling sand kind of…well, freaked him out, so we had to leave him behind.

When we got to London, television monitors in the storefronts were showing footage of Waterloo Station—something about a strange disturbance inside the terminal with escaped animals and windstorms. Gee, wonder who that could have been? We used Walt's amulet for Shu the air god to summon a burst of wind and jump to Waterloo Bridge. Of course, we landed right in the middle of a heavily armed riot squad. Just luck that I remembered the sleep spell.

Then, *finally,* we were ready to charge in and save Sadie, and she rides up in a limousine driven by an ugly dwarf in a swimsuit, and she accuses *us* of being late.

So when she told us the dwarf was driving us to Russia, I was like, "Whatever." And I got into the car.

The limousine drove through Westminster while Sadie, Walt, and I traded stories.

After hearing what Sadie had been through, I didn't feel so bad about my day. A dream of Apophis and a three-headed snake in the training room didn't seem nearly as scary as gods taking over our grandparents. I'd never liked Gran and Gramps that much, but still—yikes.

I also couldn't believe our chauffeur was Bes. Dad and I used to laugh about his pictures in museums—his bulging eyes, wagging tongue, and general lack of clothing. Supposedly, he could scare away almost anything—spirits, demons, even other gods—which is why the Egyptian commoners had loved him. Bes looked out for the little guy…um, which wasn't meant as a dwarf joke. In the flesh, he looked *exactly* like his pictures, only in full color, with full smell.

"We owe you," I told him. "So you're a friend of Bast's?"

His ears turned red. "Yeah…sure. She asks me for a favor once in a while. I try to help out."

I got the feeling there was some history there he didn't want to go into.

"When Horus spoke to me," I said, "he warned that some of the gods might try to stop us from waking Ra. Now I guess we know who."

Sadie exhaled. "If they didn't like our plan, an angry text message would've done. Nekhbet and Babi almost tore me apart!"

Her face was a little green. Her combat boots were splattered with shampoo and mud, and her favorite leather jacket had a stain on the shoulder that looked suspiciously like vulture poop. Still, I was impressed that she was conscious. Potions are hard to make and even harder to use. There's always a price for channeling that much magic.

"You did great," I told her.

Sadie looked resentfully at the black knife in her lap—the ceremonial blade Anubis had given her. "I'd be dead if not for Bes."

"Nah," Bes said. "Well, okay, you probably would be. But you would've gone down in style."

Sadie turned the strange black knife as if she might find instructions written on it.

"It's a *netjeri,*" I said. "A *serpent* blade. Priests used it for—"

"The opening-of-the-mouth ceremony," she said. "But how does that help us?"

"Don't know," I admitted. "Bes?"

"Death rituals. I try to avoid them."

I looked at Walt. Magic items were his specialty, but he didn't seem to be paying attention. Ever since Sadie had told us about her talk with Anubis, Walt had been awfully quiet. He sat next to her, fidgeting with his rings.

"You okay?" I asked him.

"Yeah…just thinking." He glanced at Sadie. "About *netjeri* blades, I mean."

Sadie tugged at her hair, like she was trying to make a curtain between her and Walt. The tension between them was so thick, I doubted even a magic knife could cut through it.

"Bloody Anubis," she muttered. "I could have died, for all he cared."

We drove in silence for a while after that. Finally, Bes turned onto Westminster Bridge and doubled back over the Thames.

Sadie frowned. "Where are we going? We need a portal. All the best artifacts are at the British Museum."

"Yeah," Bes said. "And the other magicians know that."

"Other magicians?" I asked.

"Kid, the House of Life has branches all over the world. London is the Ninth Nome. With that stunt at Waterloo, Miss Sadie just sent up a big flare telling Desjardins' followers, *Here I am!* You can bet they're going to be hunting you now. They'll be covering the museum in case you make a run for it. Fortunately, I know a different place we can open a portal."

Schooled by a dwarf. It should've occurred to me that London had other magicians. The House of Life was everywhere. Outside the security of Brooklyn House, there wasn't a single continent where we'd be safe.

We rode through South London. The scene along Camberwell Road was almost as depressing as my thoughts. Rows of grubby brick apartments and low-rent shops lined the street. An old woman scowled at us from a bus stop. In the doorway of an Asda grocery store, a couple of young tough guys eyed the Mercedes as if they wanted to steal it. I wondered if they were gods or magicians in disguise, because most people didn't notice the car.

I couldn't imagine where Bes was taking us. It didn't seem like the kind of neighborhood where

you'd find a lot of Egyptian artifacts.

Finally a big park opened up on our left: misty green fields, tree-lined paths, and a few ruined walls like aqueducts, covered in vines. The land sloped upward to a hilltop with a radio tower.

Bes jumped the curb and drove straight over the grass, knocking down a sign that said keep to the path. The evening was gray and rainy, so there weren't many people around. A couple of joggers on the nearby path didn't even look at us, as if they saw Mercedes limos four-wheeling across the park every day.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Watch and learn, kid," Bes said.

Being called "kid" by a guy shorter than me was a little annoying, but I kept my mouth shut. Bes drove straight up the hill. Close to the top was stone staircase maybe thirty feet wide, built into the hillside. It seemed to lead nowhere. Bes slammed on the brakes and we swerved to a stop. The hill was higher than I'd realized. Spread out below us was the whole of London.

Then I looked more closely at the staircase. Two sphinxes made of weathered stone lay on either side of the stairs, watching over the city. Each was about ten feet long with the typical lion's body and pharaoh's head, but they seemed totally out of place in a London park.

"Those aren't real," I said.

Bes snorted. "Of course they're real."

"I mean they aren't from Ancient Egypt. They're not old enough."

"Picky, picky," Bes said. "These are the stairs to the Crystal Palace. Big glass-and-steel exhibit hall the size of a cathedral used to sit right here on this hill."

Sadie frowned. "I read about that in school. Queen Victoria had a party there or something."

"A party or something?" Bes grunted. "It was the Grand Exhibition in 1851. Showcase of British Imperial might, et cetera. They had good candied apples."

"You were there?" I asked.

Bes shrugged. "The palace burned down in the 1930s, thanks to some stupid magicians—but that's another story. All that's left now are a few relics, like these stairs and the sphinxes."

"A stairway to nowhere," I said.

"Not nowhere," Bes corrected. "Tonight it'll take us to St. Petersburg."

Walt sat forward. His interest in the statues had apparently shaken him out of his gloom.

"But if the sphinxes aren't really Egyptian," he said, "how can they open a portal?"

Bes gave him a toothy grin. "Depends on what you mean by *really Egyptian,* kid. Every great empire is a wannabe Egypt. Having Egyptian stuff around makes them feel important. That's why you've got 'new' Egyptian artifacts in Rome, Paris,

London—you name it. That obelisk in Washington—"

"Don't mention that one, please," Sadie said.

"Anyway," Bes continued, "these are still Egyptian sphinxes. They were built to play up the connection between the British Empire and the Egyptian Empire. So yeah, they can channel magic. Especially if *I'm* driving. And now…" He looked at Walt. "It's probably time for you to get out."

I was too surprised to say anything, but Walt stared at his lap as if he'd been expecting this.

"Hang on," Sadie said. "Why can't Walt come with us? He's a magician. He can help."

Bes's expression turned serious. "Walt, you haven't told them?"

"Told us what?" Sadie demanded.

Walt clutched his amulets, as if there might be one that would help him avoid this conversation. "It's nothing. Really. It's just…I should help out at Brooklyn House. And Jaz thought—"

He faltered, probably realizing that he shouldn't have brought up her name.

"Yes?" Sadie's tone was dangerously calm. "How's Jaz doing?"

"She's—she's still in a coma," Walt said. "Amos says she'll probably make it, but that's not what I—"

"Good," Sadie said. "Glad she'll get better. So you need to get back, then. That's brilliant. Off you go. Anubis said we should hurry."

Not very subtle, the way she threw his name out there. Walt looked like she'd kicked him in the chest.

I knew Sadie wasn't being fair to him. From my conversation with Walt back at Brooklyn House, I knew he liked Sadie. Whatever was bothering him, it wasn't any kind of romantic thing with Jaz. On the other hand, if I tried to take his side, Sadie would just tell me to butt out. I might even make things worse between Sadie and him.

"It's not that I want to go back," he managed.

"But you can't go with us," Bes said firmly. I thought I heard concern in his voice, even pity. "Go on, kid. It's fine."

Walt fished something out of his pocket. "Sadie, about your birthday…you, um, probably don't want any more presents. It's not a magic knife, but I made this for you."

He poured a gold necklace into her hand. It had a small Egyptian symbol:

"That's the basketball hoop on Ra's head," I said.

Walt and Sadie both frowned at me, and I realized I probably wasn't making the moment more magical for them. "I mean it's the symbol that surrounds Ra's sun crown," I said. "A never-ending loop, the symbol of eternity, right?"

Sadie swallowed as if the magic potion was still bubbling in her stomach. "Eternity?"

Walt shot me a look that clearly meant *Please stop helping.*

"Yeah," he said, "um, it's called *shen.* I just thought, you know, you're looking for Ra. And good things, important things, should be eternal. So maybe it'll bring you luck. I meant to give it to you this morning, but…I kind of lost my nerve."

Sadie stared the talisman glittering in her palm. "Walt, I don't—I mean, thank you, but—"

"Just remember I didn't want to leave," he said. "If you need help, I'll be there for you." He glanced at me and corrected himself: "I mean both of you, of course."

"But now," Bes said, "you need to go."

"Happy birthday, Sadie," Walt said. "And good luck."

He got out of the car and trudged down the hill. We watched until he was just a tiny figure in the gloom. Then he vanished into the woods.

"Two farewell gifts," Sadie muttered, "from two gorgeous guys. I hate my life."

She latched the gold necklace around her throat and touched the *shen* symbol.

Bes gazed down at the trees where Walt had disappeared. "Poor kid. Born unusual, all right. It isn't fair."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Why were you so anxious for Walt to leave?"

The dwarf rubbed his scraggly beard. "Not my place to explain. Right now we've got work to do. The more time we give Menshikov to prepare his defenses, the harder this is going to get."

I wasn't ready to drop it, but Bes stared at me stubbornly, and I knew I wasn't going to get any more answers from him. Nobody can look stubborn like a dwarf.

"So, Russia," I said. "By driving up an empty staircase."

"Exactly." Bes floored the accelerator. The Mercedes churned grass and mud and barreled up the stairs. I was sure we'd reach the top and get nothing but a broken axle, but at the last second, a portal of swirling sand opened in front of us. Our wheels left the ground, and the black limousine flew headlong into the vortex.

We slammed into pavement on the other side, scattering a group of surprised teenagers. Sadie groaned and pried her head off the headrest.

"Can't we go anywhere *gently*?" she asked.

Bes hit the wipers and scraped the sand off our windshield. Outside it was dark and snowy. Eighteenth-century stone buildings lined a frozen river lit with streetlamps. Beyond the river glowed more fairy-tale buildings: golden church domes, white palaces, and ornate mansions painted Easter-egg green and blue. I might have believed we'd traveled back in time three hundred years—except for the cars, the electric lights, and of course the teenagers with body piercings, dyed hair, and black leather clothes screaming at us in Russian and pounding on the hood of the Mercedes because we'd almost run them over.

"They can see us?" Sadie asked.

"Russians," Bes said with a kind of grudging admiration. "Very superstitious people. They tend to see magic for what it is. We'll have to be careful here."

"You've been here before?" I asked.

He gave me a *duh* look, then pointed to either side of the car. We'd landed between two stone sphinxes standing on pedestals. They looked like a lot of sphinxes I'd seen—with crowned human heads on lion bodies—but I'd never seen sphinxes covered in snow.

"Are those authentic?" I asked.

"Farthest-north Egyptian artifacts in the world," Bes said. "Pillaged from Thebes and brought up here to decorate Russia's new imperial city, St. Petersburg. Like I said, every new empire wants a piece of Egypt."

The kids outside were still shouting and banging on the car. One smashed a bottle against our windshield.

"Um," Sadie said, "should we move?"

"Nah," Bes said. "Russian kids always hang out by the sphinxes. Been doing it for hundreds of years."

"But it's like midnight here," I said. "And it's snowing."

"Did I mention they're Russian?" Bes said. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it."

He opened his door. Glacier-cold wind swept into the Mercedes, but Bes stepped out wearing nothing but his Speedo. The kids backed up quickly. I couldn't blame them. Bes said something in Russian, then roared like a lion. The kids screamed and ran.

Bes's form seemed to ripple. When he got back into the car, he was wearing a warm winter coat, a fur-lined hat, and fuzzy mittens.

"See?" he said. "Superstitious. They know enough to run from a god."

"A small hairy god in a Speedo, yes," Sadie said. "So what do we do now?"

Bes pointed across the river at a glowing palace of white-and-gold stone. "That's the Hermitage."

"Hermits live there?" Sadie asked.

"No," I said. "I've heard of that place. It was the tsar's palace. Now it's a museum. Best Egyptian collection in Russia."

"Dad took you there, I suppose?" Sadie asked. I thought we were over the whole jealous-about-traveling-the-world-with-Dad thing, but every once in a while it cropped up again.

"We never went." I tried not to sound defensive. "He got an invitation to speak there once, but he declined."

Bes chuckled. "Your dad was smart. Russian magicians don't exactly welcome outsiders. They protect their territory fiercely."

Sadie stared across the river. "You mean the headquarters of the Eighteenth Nome is *inside* the museum?"

"Somewhere," Bes agreed, "but it's hidden with magic, because I've never found the entrance. That part you're looking at is the Winter Palace, the old home of the tsar. There's a whole complex of other mansions behind it. I've heard it would take eleven days just to see everything in all the Hermitage collections."

"But unless we wake Ra, the world ends in four days," I said.

"Three days now," Sadie corrected, "if it's after midnight."

I winced. "Thanks for the reminder."

"So take the abbreviated tour," Bes said. "Start with the Egyptian section. Ground floor, main museum."

"Aren't you coming with us?" I asked.

"He can't, can he?" Sadie guessed. "Like Bast couldn't enter Desjardins' house in Paris. The magicians charm their headquarters against the gods. Isn't that right?"

Bes made an even uglier face. "I'll walk you down to the bridge, but I can't go any farther. If I cross the River Neva too close to the Hermitage, I'll set off all kinds of alarms. You'll have to sneak inside somehow—"

"Breaking into a museum at night," Sadie muttered. "We've had such good luck with that."

"—and find the entrance to the Eighteenth Nome. And don't get captured alive."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "It's better to be captured dead?"

The look in his eyes was grim. "Just trust me. You don't want to be Menshikov's prisoner."

Bes snapped his fingers, and suddenly we were wearing fleece parkas, ski pants, and winter boots.

"Come on, *malishi,*" he said. "I'll walk you to the Dvortsovyy Bridge."

The bridge was only a few hundred yards away, but it seemed farther. March obviously wasn't springtime in St. Petersburg. The dark, the wind, and the snow made it feel more like January in Alaska. Personally, I would've preferred a sweltering day in the Egyptian desert. Even with the warm clothes Bes had summoned for us, my teeth couldn't stop chattering.

Bes wasn't in a hurry. He kept slowing down and giving us the guided tour until I thought my nose would fall off from frostbite. He told us we were on Vasilevsky Island, across the Neva River from the center of St. Petersburg. He pointed out the different church spires and monuments, and when he got excited, he started slipping into Russian.

"You've spent a lot of time here," I said.

He walked in silence for a few paces. "Most of that was long ago. It wasn't—"

He stopped so abruptly, I stumbled into him. He stared across the street at a big palace with canary yellow walls and a green gabled roof. Lit up in the night through a swirl of snow, it looked unreal, like one of the ghostly images in the First Nome's Hall of Ages.

"Prince Menshikov's palace," Bes muttered.

His voice was full of loathing. I almost thought he was going to yell BOO at the building, but he just gritted his teeth.

Sadie looked at me for an explanation, but I wasn't a walking Wikipedia like she seemed to think. I knew stuff about Egypt, but Russia? Not so much.

"You mean Menshikov as in Vlad the Inhaler?" I asked.

"He's a descendant." Bes curled his lip with distaste. He said a Russian word I was willing to bet was a pretty bad insult. "Back in the seventeen hundreds, Prince Menshikov threw a party for Peter the Great—the tsar who built this city. Peter loved dwarves. He was a lot like the Egyptians that way. He thought we were good luck, so he always kept some of us in his court. Anyway, Menshikov wanted to entertain the tsar, so he thought it would be funny to stage a dwarf wedding. He forced them…he forced *us* to dress up, pretend to get married, and dance around. All the big folk were laughing, jeering…"

His voice trailed off.

Bes described the party like it was yesterday. Then I remembered that this weird little guy was a god. He'd been around for eons.

Sadie put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Bes. Must have been awful."

He scowled. "Russian magicians…they love capturing gods, using us. I can still hear that wedding music, and the tsar laughing…"

"How'd you get away?" I asked.

Bes glared at me. Obviously, I'd asked a bad question.

"Enough of this." Bes turned up his collar. "We're wasting time."

He forged ahead, but I got the feeling he wasn't really leaving Menshikov's palace behind. Suddenly its cheery yellow walls and brightly lit windows looked sinister.

Another hundred yards through the bitter wind, and we reached the bridge. On the other side, the Winter Palace shimmered.

"I'll take the Mercedes the long way around," Bes said. "Down to the next bridge, and circle south of the Hermitage. Less likely to alert the magicians that I'm here."

Now I realized why he was so paranoid about setting off alarms. Magicians had snared him in St. Petersburg once before. I remembered what he'd told us in the car: *Don't get captured alive.*

"How do we find you if we succeed?" Sadie asked.

"*When* you succeed," Bes said. "Think positive, girl, or the world ends."

"Right." Sadie shivered in her new parka. "Positive."

"I'll meet you on the Nevsky Prospekt, the main street with all the shops, just south of the Hermitage. I'll be at the Chocolate Museum."

"The *what* now?" I asked.

"Well, it's not really a museum. More of a shop—closed this time of night, but the owner always opens up for me. They've got chocolate *everything*—chess sets, lions, Vladimir Lenin heads—"

"The communist guy?" I asked.

"Yes, Professor Brilliant," Bes said. "The communist guy, in *chocolate.*"

"So let me get this straight," Sadie said. "We break into a heavily guarded Russian national museum, find the magicians' secret headquarters, find a dangerous scroll, and escape. Meanwhile, you will be eating chocolate."

Bes nodded solemnly. "It's a good plan. It might work. If something happens and I can't meet you at the Chocolate Museum, our exit point is the Egyptian Bridge, to the south at the Fontanka River. Just turn on the—"

"Enough," Sadie said. "You *will* meet us at the chocolate shop. And you *will* provide me with a takeaway bag. That is final. Now, go!"

Bes gave her a lopsided smile. "You're okay, girl."

He trudged back toward the Mercedes.

I looked across the half-frozen river to the Winter Palace. Somehow, London didn't seem as dreary or dangerous anymore.

"Are we in as much trouble as I think?" I asked Sadie.

"More," she said. "Let's go crash the tsar's palace, shall we?"

10. An Old Red Friend Comes to Visit

GETTING INSIDE THE HERMITAGE wasn't a problem.

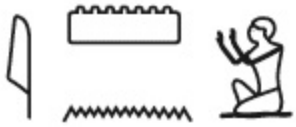
State-of-the-art security doesn't protect against magic. Sadie and I had to combine forces to get past the perimeter, but with a little concentration, ink and papyrus, and some tapped energy from our godly friends Isis and Horus, we managed to pull off a short stroll through the Duat.

One minute we were standing in the abandoned Palace Square. Then everything went gray and misty. My stomach tingled like I was in free fall. We slipped out of synch with the mortal world and passed through the iron gates and solid stone into the museum.

The Egyptian room was on the ground floor, just as Bes had said. We re-entered the mortal realm and found ourselves in the middle of the collection: sarcophagi in glass cases, hieroglyphic scrolls, statues of gods and pharaohs. It wasn't much different from a hundred other Egyptian collections I'd seen, but the setting was pretty impressive. A vaulted ceiling soared overhead. The polished marble floor was done in a white-and-gray diamond pattern, which made walking on it kind of like walking on an optical illusion. I wondered how many rooms there were like this in the tsar's palace, and if it really took eleven days to see them all. I hoped Bes was right about the secret entrance to the nome being somewhere in this room. We didn't have eleven days to search. In less than seventy-two hours, Apophis would break free. I remembered that glowing red eye beneath the scarab shells—a force of chaos so powerful, it could melt human senses. Three days, and that *thing* would be unleashed on the world.

Sadie summoned her staff and pointed it at the nearest security camera. The lens cracked and made a sound like a bug zapper. Even in the best of situations, technology and magic don't get along. One of the easiest spells in the world is to make electronics malfunction. I just have to look at a cell phone funny to make it blow up. And computers? Forget about it. I imagined Sadie had just sent a magical pulse through the security system that would fry every camera and sensor in the network.

Still, there were other kinds of surveillance—*magical* kinds. I pulled a piece of black linen and a pair of crude wax *shabti* out of my bag. I wrapped the *shabti* in the cloth and spoke a command word: *"I'mun."*



The hieroglyph for *Hide* glowed briefly over the cloth. A mass of darkness bloomed from the package, like a squid's ink cloud. It expanded until it covered both Sadie and me in a gauzy bubble of shadows. We could see through it, but hopefully nothing could see in. The cloud would be invisible to

anyone outside.

"You got it right this time!" Sadie said. "When did you master the spell?"

I probably blushed. I'd been obsessed with figuring out the invisibility spell for months, ever since I'd seen Zia use it in the First Nome.

"Actually I'm still—" A gold spark shot out of the cloud like a miniature fireworks rocket. "I'm still working on it."

Sadie sighed. "Well…better than last time. The cloud looked like a lava lamp. And the time before, when it smelled like rotten eggs—"

"Could we just get going?" I asked. "Where should we start?"

Her eyes locked on one of the displays. She drifted toward it in a trance.

"Sadie?" I followed her to a limestone grave marker—a stele—about two feet by three feet. The description next to it was in Russian and English.

"'From the tomb of the scribe Ipi,'" I read aloud. "'Worked in the court of King Tut.' Why are you interested…oh."

Stupid me. The picture on the gravestone showed the deceased scribe honoring Anubis. After talking with Anubis in person, Sadie must've found it strange to see him in a three-thousand-year-old tomb painting, especially when he was pictured with the head of a jackal, wearing a skirt.

"Walt likes you."

I have no idea why I blurted that out. This wasn't the time or the place. I knew I wasn't doing Walt any favors by taking his side. But I'd started to feel bad for him after Bes kicked him out of the limo. The guy had come all the way to London to help me save Sadie, and we'd dumped him in Crystal Palace Park like an unwanted hitchhiker.

I was kind of angry at Sadie for giving him the cold shoulder and crushing so hard on Anubis, who was five thousand years too old for her and not even human. Plus, the way she snubbed Walt reminded me too much of the way Zia had treated me at first. And maybe, if I was honest with myself, I was also irritated with Sadie because she'd solved her own problems in London without needing our help.

Wow. That sounded really selfish. But I suppose it was true. Amazing how many different ways a younger sister can annoy you at once.

Sadie didn't take her eyes off the stele. "Carter, you have no idea what you're talking about."

"You're not giving the guy a chance," I insisted. "Whatever's going on with him, it's got nothing to do with you."

"Very reassuring, but that's not—"

"Besides, Anubis is a *god.* You don't honestly think—"

"Carter!" she snapped. My cloaking spell must've been sensitive to emotion, because another gold spark whistled and popped from our not-so-invisible cloud. "I wasn't looking at this stone because of Anubis."

"You weren't?"

"No. And I'm certainly not having an argument with you about *Walt.* Contrary to what you might think, I don't spend every waking hour thinking about boys."

"Just most waking hours?"

She rolled her eyes. "Look at the gravestone, birdbrain. It's got a border around it, like a window frame or—"

"A door," I said. "It's a false door. Lots of tombs had those. It was like a symbolic gateway for the dead person's *ba,* so it could go back and forth from the Duat."

Sadie pulled her wand and traced the edges of the stele. "This bloke Ipi was a scribe, which was another word for magician. He could've been one of us."

"So?"

"So maybe that's why the stone is *glowing,* Carter. What if this false door's not false?"

I looked at the stele more closely, but I didn't see any glow. I thought maybe Sadie was hallucinating from exhaustion or too much potion in her system. Then she touched her wand to the center of the stele and spoke the first command word we'd ever learned: *"W'peh."*

Open. A golden hieroglyph burned on the stone:

The grave marker shot out a beam of light like a movie projector. Suddenly, a full-size doorway shimmered in front of us—a rectangular portal showing the hazy image of another room.

I looked at Sadie in amazement. "How did you do that?" I asked. "You've never been able to do that before."

She shrugged as if it were no big deal. "I wasn't thirteen before. Maybe that's it."

"But I'm fourteen!" I protested. "And I *still* can't do that."

"Girls mature earlier."

I gritted my teeth. I hated the spring months—March, April, May—because until my birthday rolled around in June, Sadie could claim to be only a year younger than me. She always got an attitude after her birthday, as if she'd catch up to me somehow and become my *big* sister. Talk about a nightmare.

She gestured at the glowing doorway. "After you, brother, dear. You're the one with the sparkly invisibility cloud."

Before I could lose my cool, I stepped through the portal.

I almost fell and broke my face. The other side of the portal was a mirror hanging five feet off the floor. I'd stepped onto a fireplace mantel. I caught Sadie as she came through, just in time to keep her from toppling off the ledge.

"Ta," she whispered. "Someone's been reading too much *Alice Through the Looking Glass."*

I'd thought the Egyptian room was impressive, but it was nothing compared to this ballroom. Coppery geometric designs glittered on the ceiling. The walls were lined with dark green columns and gilded doors. White and gold inlaid marble made a huge octagonal pattern on the floor. With a blazing chandelier above, the golden filigree and green and white polished stone gleamed so brightly, they hurt my eyes.

Then I realized most of the light wasn't coming from the chandelier. It was coming from the magician casting a spell at the other end of the room. His back was turned, but I could tell it was Vlad Menshikov. Just as Sadie had described, he was a pudgy little man with curly gray hair and a white suit. He stood in a protective circle that pulsed with emerald light. He raised his staff, and the tip burned like a welding torch. To his right, just outside the circle, stood a green vase the size of a grown man. To his left, writhing in glowing chains, was a creature I recognized as a demon. It had a hairy humanoid body with purplish skin, but instead of a head, a giant corkscrew sprouted between its shoulders.

"Mercy!" it screamed in a watery, metallic voice. Don't ask me how a demon could scream with a corkscrew head—but the sound resonated up the screw like it was a massive tuning fork.

Vlad Menshikov kept chanting. The green vase throbbed with light.

Sadie nudged me and whispered, "Look."

"Yeah," I whispered back. "Some kind of summoning ritual."

"No," she hissed. "Look *there*."

She pointed to our right. In the corner of the room, twenty feet from the fireplace mantel, was an old-fashioned mahogany desk.

Sadie had told me about Anubis's instructions: We were supposed to find Menshikov's desk. The next section of the Book of Ra would be in the middle drawer. Could that really be the desk? It seemed too easy. As quietly as we could, Sadie and I climbed off the mantel and crept along the wall. I prayed the invisibility shroud wouldn't send up any more fireworks.

We were about halfway to the desk when Vlad Menshikov finished his chant. He slammed his staff against the floor, and it stuck there straight up, the tip still burning at a million degrees. He turned his head slightly, and I caught the glint of his white sunglasses. He rummaged in his coat pockets while the big green vase glowed and the demon screamed in his chains.

"Don't fuss, Death-to-Corks," Menshikov chided. His voice was even rougher than Sadie had described—like a heavy smoker talking through the blades of a fan. "You know I need a sacrifice to summon such a major god. It's nothing personal."

Sadie frowned at me and mouthed, *Major god?*

I shook my head, baffled. The House of Life didn't allow mortals to summon gods. It was the main reason Desjardins hated us. Menshikov was supposedly his best bud. So what was he doing, breaking the rules?

"Hurts!" the poor demon wailed. "Served you for fifty years, master. Please!"

"Now, now," Menshikov said without a trace of sympathy. "I *have* to use execration. Only the most painful form of banishment will generate enough energy."

From his suit coat pocket, Menshikov pulled a regular corkscrew and a shard of pottery covered with red hieroglyphics.

He held up both items and began to chant again: "I name you Death-to-Corks, Servant of Vladimir, He Who Turns in the Night."

As the demon's names were spoken, the magical chains steamed and tightened around his body. Menshikov held the corkscrew over the flame of his staff. The demon thrashed and wailed. As the smaller corkscrew turned red hot, the demon's body began to smoke.

I watched in horror. I knew about sympathetic magic, of course. The idea was to make something small affect something large by binding them together. The more alike the items were—like the corkscrew and the demon—the easier they were to bind. Voodoo dolls worked on the same theory.

But execration was serious stuff. It meant destroying a creature utterly—erasing its physical form and even its name from existence. It took some serious magic to pull off that kind of spell. If done wrong, it could destroy the caster. But if done right, most victims didn't stand a chance. Regular mortals, magicians, ghosts, even demons could be wiped off the face of the earth. Execration might not destroy major powers like gods, but it would still be like detonating a nuclear bomb in their face. They'd be blasted so deep into the Duat, they might never come back.

Vlad Menshikov worked the spell like he did it every day. He kept chanting as the corkscrew began to melt, and the demon melted with it. Menshikov dropped the pottery shard on the floor—the red hieroglyphs that spelled all the demon's various names. With one final word of power, Menshikov stepped on the shard and crushed it to bits. Death-to-Corks dissolved, chains and all.

Usually I don't feel sorry for creatures of the underworld, but I couldn't help getting a lump in my throat. I couldn't believe the casual way Menshikov had snuffed out his servant just to power a larger spell.

As soon as the demon was gone, the fire on Menshikov's staff died. Hieroglyphs burned around the summoning circle. The big green jar trembled and a voice from deep inside boomed, "Hello, Vladimir. Long time."

Sadie inhaled sharply. I had to cover her mouth to keep her from screaming. We both knew that voice. I remembered it all too well from the Red Pyramid.

"Set." Menshikov didn't even look tired from the summoning. He sounded awfully calm for someone addressing the god of evil. "We need to talk."

Sadie pushed my hand away and whispered, "Is he mad?"

"Desk," I said. "Scroll. Out of here. *Now.*"

For once, she gave me no argument. She began fishing supplies out of her bag.

Meanwhile the big green jar wobbled as if Set were trying to tip it over.

"A malachite vase?" The god sounded annoyed. "Really, Vladimir. I thought we were on friendlier terms than that."

Menshikov's laugh sounded like someone choking a cat. "Excellent at constraining evil spirits, isn't it? And this room has more malachite than any other place on earth. Empress Alexandra was quite wise to have it built for her drawing room."

The jar plinked. "But it smells like old pennies in here, and it's much too cold. Have you ever been stuck in a malachite jar, Vlad? I'm not a genie. I'd be so much more talkative if we could sit face-to-face, perhaps over tea."

"I'm afraid not," said Menshikov. "Now, you'll answer my questions."

"Oh, very well," Set said. "I like Brazil for the World Cup. I'd advise investing in platinum and small-cap funds. And your lucky numbers this week are 2, 13—"

"Not those questions!" Menshikov snapped.

Sadie pulled a lump of wax from her bag and worked furiously, fashioning some kind of animal shape. I knew she was going to test the desk for magic defenses. She was better at that kind of spell

than I was, but I wasn't sure how she'd do it. Egyptian magic is pretty open-ended. There are always a thousand different ways to accomplish a task. The trick is being creative with your supplies and picking a way that won't get you killed.

"You will tell me what I need to know," Menshikov demanded, "or that jar will become even more uncomfortable."

"My dear Vladimir." Set's voice was full of evil amusement. "What you *need* to know may be very different from what you *want* to know. Didn't your unfortunate accident teach you that?"

Menshikov touched his sunglasses, as if making sure they hadn't fallen off.

"You will tell me the binding for Apophis," he said in a steely tone. "Then you will tell me how to neutralize the enchantments on Brooklyn House. You know Kane's defenses better than anyone. Once I destroy him, I will have no opposition."

As the meaning of Menshikov's words sank in, a wave of rage nearly knocked me off my feet. This time, Sadie had to clamp *my* mouth shut.

"Calm!" she whispered. "You're going to start the invisibility shield popping again!"

I pushed her hand away and hissed, "But he wants to free Apophis!"

"I know."

"And attack Amos—"

"I know! So help me get the bloody scroll and let's get out of here!" She put her wax animal on the desk—a dog, I thought —and began writing hieroglyphs on its back with a stylus.

I took a shaky breath. Sadie was right, but still—Menshikov was talking about freeing Apophis and killing our uncle. What kind of magician makes deals with Set? Except for Sadie and me. That was different.

Set's laugh echoed inside the green vase. "So: the binding for Apophis and the secrets of Brooklyn House. Is that all, Vladimir? I wonder what your master Desjardins would think if he found out your real plan, and the sort of friends you keep."

Menshikov snatched up his staff. The carved-serpent tip flared again. "Be careful with your threats, *Evil Day*."

The jar trembled. Throughout the room, glass cases shivered. The chandelier jangled like a three-ton wind chime.

I gave Sadie a panicked look. "Did he just—"

"Set's secret name," she confirmed, still writing on her wax dog.

"How—"

"I don't know, Carter. Now, shh!"

A god's secret name had all kinds of power. It was supposed to be almost impossible to get. To truly learn it, you couldn't just hear it repeated by some random person. You had to hear it straight from the god himself, or from the person closest to his heart. Once you had it, it gave you serious magical leverage over that god. Sadie had learned Set's secret name during our quest last Christmas, but how had Menshikov gotten it?

Inside the jar, Set growled with annoyance. "I really *hate* that name. Why couldn't it have been Glorious Day? Or the Rockin' Red Reaper? That's rather nice. Bad enough when you were the only one who knew it, Vlad. Now I've got the Kane girl to worry about—"

"Serve us," Menshikov said, "and the Kanes will be destroyed. You will be the honored lieutenant of Apophis. You can raise another temple, even grander than the Red Pyramid."

"Uh-huh," Set said. "Maybe you haven't noticed, but I don't do well with the whole second-in-command concept. As for Apophis, he's not one to suffer other gods getting attention."

"We will free Apophis with or without your help," Menshikov warned. "By the equinox, he *will* rise. But if you help us make that happen sooner, you will be rewarded. Your other option is execration. Oh, I know it won't destroy you completely, but with your secret name I can send you into the abyss for eons, and it will be very, very painful. I'll give you thirty seconds to decide?"

I nudged Sadie. "Hurry."

She tapped the wax dog, and it came to life. It started sniffing around the desk, looking for magic traps.

Inside the jar, Set sighed. "Well, Vladimir, you do know how to make an appealing offer. The binding for Apophis, you say? Yes, I was there when Ra cast the Serpent into that prison of scarabs. I suppose I could remember the ingredients he used for the binding. Quite a day that was! I was wearing red, I think. At the victory feast they served the most delicious honey-baked locusts—"

"You have ten seconds," Menshikov said.

"Oh, I'll cooperate! I hope you have a pen and paper handy. It's a rather long list of ingredients. Let's see…what did Ra use for a base? Bat dung? Then there were the dried toads, of course. And then…"

Set began rattling off ingredients, while Sadie's wax dog sniffed around the desk. Finally it lay down on the blotter and went to sleep.

Sadie frowned at me. "No traps."

"That's too easy," I whispered back.

She opened the top drawer. There was the papyrus scroll, just like the one we'd found in Brooklyn. She slipped it into her bag.

We were halfway back to the fireplace when Set caught us by surprise.

He was going on with his list of ridiculous ingredients: "And snakeskins. Yes, three large ones, with a sprinkling of hot sauce—" Then he stopped abruptly, like he'd had a revelation. He spoke in a much louder voice, calling across the room. "And a sacrificial victim would be good! Maybe a young idiot magician who can't do a proper invisibility spell, like CARTER KANE over there!"

I froze. Vladimir Menshikov turned, and my panic became too much for the invisibility shroud.

Half a dozen golden sparks shot up with a loud happy *WHEEEEE!* The cloud of darkness dissolved.

Menshikov stared right at me. "My, my…how kind of you to deliver yourselves. Well done, Set."

"Hmm?" Set asked innocently. "Do we have visitors?"

"Set!" Sadie growled. "I'll kick you in the *ba* for that, so help me!"

The voice in the jar gasped. "Sadie Kane? How exciting! Too bad I'm stuck in *this jar* and no one will *let me out*."

The hint wasn't too subtle, but surely he couldn't believe we'd free him after he'd blown our cover.

Sadie faced Menshikov, her wand and staff ready. "You're working with Apophis. You're on the wrong side."

Menshikov removed his glasses. His eyes were ruined pits of scar tissue, burned skin, and glistening corneas. Believe me, that's the *least* gross way I can describe them.

"The wrong side?" Menshikov asked. "Girl, you have no idea the powers that are in play. Five thousand years ago, Egyptian priests prophesied how the world would end. Ra would grow old and tired, and Apophis would swallow him and plunge the world into darkness. Chaos would rule forever. Now the time is here! You can't stop it. You can only choose whether you'll be destroyed, or whether you'll bow to the power of Chaos and survive."

"Right," Set chimed in. "It's too bad I'm stuck in *this jar.* Otherwise I might have to *take sides and help someone.*"

"Shut up, Set," Menshikov snapped. "No one is crazy enough to trust you. And as for you, children, you are clearly not the threat I imagined."

"Great," I said. "So we can go?"

Menshikov laughed. "Would you run to Desjardins and tell him what you've heard? He wouldn't believe you. He'd put you on trial, then execute you. But I'll spare you that embarrassment. I'll kill you right now."

"How fun!" Set said. "Wish I could see it, but I'm stuck in *this jar.*"

I tried to think. Menshikov was still inside a protective circle, which meant he had a big defensive advantage. I wasn't sure I could bust through it, even if I could summon a combat avatar. Meanwhile, Menshikov could take his time trying out different ways to destroy us. Would he blast us with elemental magic? Change us into bugs?

He threw his staff to the ground, and I cursed.

Throwing down your staff may sound like a sign of surrender, but in Egyptian magic, it's bad news. It usually means *Hey, I'm going to summon a big nasty thing to kill you while I stand safely inside my circle and laugh!*

Sure enough, Menshikov's staff began to writhe and grow.

Great, I thought. Another serpent.

But something was wrong with this one. Instead of a tail, it had a head on both ends. At first I thought we'd caught some luck, and Menshikov had summoned a monster with a rare genetic birth defect. Then the thing sprouted four dragon legs. Its body grew until it was the size of a draft horse, curved like a U, with mottled red and green scales and a rattlesnake head on either side. It reminded me of that two-headed animal from Doctor Dolittle. You know—the pushmi-pullyu? Except Doctor Dolittle would never have wanted to talk to *this* thing, and if he had, it would probably have said just *Hello, I'm going to eat you.*

Both heads turned toward us and hissed.

"I've really had enough snakes for one week," I muttered.

Menshikov smiled. "Ah, but serpents are my specialty, Carter Kane!" He touched a silver pendant hanging over his necktie—an amulet shaped like a snake. "And this particular creature is my favorite: the *tjesu heru.* Two hungry mouths to feed. Two troublesome children. Perfect!"

Sadie and I looked at each other. We had one of those moments where we could read each

other's expressions perfectly.

We both knew we couldn't defeat Menshikov. He'd let the pushmi-pullyu snake wear us down, and if we survived that, he'd just blast us with something else. The guy was a pro. We would either die or get captured, and Bes had warned us about not getting taken alive. After seeing what had happened to that demon Death-to-Corks, I took Bes's warning seriously.

To survive, we'd have to do something crazy—something so suicidal Menshikov would never expect it. We had to get help *immediately*.

"Should I?" Sadie asked.

"Do it," I agreed.

The *tjesu heru* bared its dripping fangs. You wouldn't think a creature with no back end could move so fast, but it bent both heads toward us like a giant horseshoe and charged.

I pulled my sword. Sadie was faster.

She pointed her staff at Set's malachite jar and yelled her favorite command word: *"Ha-di!"*

I was afraid it wouldn't work. She hadn't tried the destruction spell since she separated herself from Isis. But just before the monster reached me, the green jar shattered.

Menshikov screamed, *"Nyet!"*

A sandstorm exploded through the room. Hot winds pushed Sadie and me against the fireplace. A wall of red sand slammed into the *tjesu heru* and sent it flying sideways into a malachite column. Vlad Menshikov was blasted right out of his protective circle and banged his head on a table. He crumpled to the ground, red sand swirling over him until he was completely buried.

When the storm cleared, a man in a red silk suit stood in front of us. He had skin the color of cherry Kool-Aid, a shaved head, a dark goatee, and glittering black eyes lined with kohl. He looked like an Egyptian devil ready for a night on the town.

He grinned and spread his hands in a *ta-da* gesture. "That's better! Thank you, Sadie Kane!"

To our left, the *tjesu heru* hissed and flailed, trying to get back on its feet. The pile of red sand covering Vlad Menshikov started to move.

"Do something, Evil Day!" Sadie commanded. "Get rid of them!"

Set winced. "No need to get personal with the names."

"Maybe you'd prefer Rockin' Red Reaper?" I asked.

Set made a picture frame with his fingers, as if imagining that name on his driver's license. "Yes…that *is* nice, isn't it?"

The *tjesu heru* staggered to its feet. It shook both heads and glared at us, but it seemed to ignore Set, even though he was the one who'd slammed it against the wall.

"It has beautiful coloration, doesn't it?" Set asked. "A gorgeous specimen."

"Just kill it!" I yelled.

Set looked shocked. "Oh, I couldn't do that! I'm much too fond of snakes. Besides, GETM would have my hide."

"Get 'em?" I asked.

"Gods for the Ethical Treatment of Monsters."

"You're making that up!" I yelled.

Set grinned. "Still…I'm afraid you'll have to deal with the *tjesu heru* on your own."

The monster hissed at us, which probably meant, *Sweet!* I raised my sword to keep it at bay.

The pile of red sand shifted. Menshikov's dazed face rose from the top. Set snapped his fingers, and a large ceramic pot appeared in the air, shattering on the magician's head. Menshikov slipped back into the sand.

"I'll stay here and entertain Vladimir," Set said.

"Can't you execrate him, or something?" Sadie demanded.

"Oh, I wish! Unfortunately, I'm rather limited when someone holds my secret name, especially when they've given me specific orders not to kill them." He stared accusingly at Sadie. "At any rate, I may be able to buy you a few minutes, but Vlad is going to be quite mad when he comes around, so I'd hurry, if I were you. Good luck surviving! And good luck eating them, *tjesu heru!*"

I wanted to strangle Set, but we had bigger problems. As if encouraged by Set's pep talk, the *tjesu heru* lunged at us. Sadie and I sprinted for the nearest door.

We ran through the Winter Palace with Set's laughter echoing behind us.

SADIE

11. Carter Does Something Incredibly Stupid (and No One Is Surprised)

I UNDERSTAND, CARTER. I do.

Have me narrate the most painful part. Of course, I can't blame you. What happened was awful enough for me, but for you—well, I wouldn't want to talk about it either.

There we were in the Winter Palace, racing down polished marble hallways that were *not* designed for running. Behind us, the two-headed *tjesu heru* skidded and slammed into walls as it tried to turn corners, much like Muffin used to do whenever Gran mopped the floor. That's the only reason the monster didn't catch us immediately.

Since we'd teleported into the Malachite Room, I had no idea where the nearest exit was. I wasn't even sure if we were actually *in* the Winter Palace, or if Menshikov's office was some clever facsimile that existed only in the Duat. I was beginning to think we'd never get out when we rounded a corner, scrambled down a staircase, and spotted a set of glass- and-iron doors leading out to Palace Square.

The *tjesu heru* was right behind us. It slipped and rolled down the staircase, demolishing a plaster statue of some unfortunate tsar.

We were ten meters from the exit when I saw the chains across the doors.

"Carter," I gasped, waving helplessly at the padlock.

I hate to admit just how weak I felt. I didn't have the strength for another spell. Cracking Set's vase in the Malachite Room had been my last hurrah, which is a good example of why you shouldn't use magic to solve all your problems. Summoning a Divine Word to break the vase had taken so much energy, I felt as if I'd been digging holes in the hot sun. It would've been much easier just to throw a rock. If I lived through the night, I decided to add some rocks to my tool bag.

We were three meters away when Carter thrust his fist toward the doors. The Eye of Horus burned against the padlock, and the doors burst open as if they'd been hit by a giant fist. I hadn't seen Carter do anything like that since our fight at the Red Pyramid, but I didn't have time to be amazed. We bolted outside into the wintry night, the *tjesu heru* roaring behind us.

You'll think I was mad, but my first thought was: *That was too easy.*

Despite the monster chasing us and the business with Set (whom I would strangle at the first opportunity—that backstabbing git!), I couldn't help feeling we'd breached Menshikov's inner sanctum and snatched the scroll without nearly enough trouble. Where were the traps? The alarms? The exploding-donkey curses? I was certain we'd stolen the authentic scroll. I'd felt the same tingle in my fingers as when I'd taken the one from the Brooklyn Museum (without the fire, thankfully). So

why hadn't the scroll been better protected?

I was so tired, I fell a few steps behind Carter, which probably saved my life. I felt a crawling sensation across my scalp. I sensed darkness above me—a feeling that reminded me too much of the shadow of Nekhbet's wings. I looked up and saw the *tjesu heru* sailing over our heads like a massive bullfrog, timing its pounce so it would land—

"Carter, stop!" I yelled.

Easier said than done on icy pavement. I skidded to a halt, but Carter was going too fast. He fell on his bum and slid, his sword skittering to one side.

The *tjesu heru* landed right on top of him. If it hadn't been U-shaped, Carter would've been crushed; but it curved around him like an enormous pair of headphones, one head glaring down at him from either side.

How could something so large have leaped so far? Too late, I realized we should have stayed inside where it was harder for the monster to move. Out here, we had no chance of outrunning it.

"Carter," I said. "Stay perfectly still."

He froze in crab-walk position. The monster's two heads dripped venom that hissed and steamed on the icy stones.

"Oi!" I yelled. Not having any rocks, I picked up a chunk of broken ice and threw it at the *tjesu heru.* Naturally, I hit Carter in the back instead. Nevertheless, I got the *tjesu heru*'s attention.

Both heads turned toward me, twin tongues flickering. First step done: distract the monster.

Second step: find some clever way to draw it away from Carter. That part was giving me a bit more trouble.

I'd used my only potion. Most of my magic supplies were gone. My staff and wand wouldn't do me much good with my magical reserves drained. The knife from Anubis? Somehow I doubted this was the right situation to open someone's mouth.

The amulet from Walt? I had not the slightest idea how to use it.

For the millionth time, I regretted having given up the spirit of Isis. I could really have used the full magic arsenal of a goddess. But, of course, that was exactly why I'd *had* to separate from her. That sort of power is intoxicating, dangerously addictive. It can quickly destroy your life.

But what if I could form a limited bond? In the Malachite Room, I'd managed the *ha-di* spell for the first time in months. And while it had been difficult, it hadn't been impossible.

Right, Isis, I thought. *Here's what I need—*

Don't think, Sadie, her voice whispered back almost immediately, which was quite a shock. *Divine magic has to be involuntary, like breathing.*

You mean… I stopped myself. *Don't think.* Well, that shouldn't be too hard. I held up my staff, and a golden hieroglyph blazed in the air. A one-meter-tall *tyet* lit up the courtyard like a Christmas-tree star.

The *tjesu heru* snarled, its yellow eyes fixed on the hieroglyph.

"Don't like that, eh?" I called. "Symbol of Isis, you big ugly mutt. Now, get away from my brother!"

It was a complete bluff, of course. I doubted the glowing sign could do anything useful. But I hoped the snake creature wasn't smart enough to know that.

Slowly, Carter edged backward. He looked for his sword, but it was ten meters away—much too far to reach.

I kept my eyes on the monster. I used the butt of my staff to trace a magic circle in the snow around me. It wouldn't provide much protection, but it was better than nothing.

"Carter," I called, "When I say go, run back here."

"That thing's too fast!" he said.

"I'll try to detonate the hieroglyph and blind it."

I still maintain that the plan would've worked, but I didn't get the chance to try it. Somewhere off to my left, boots crunched on ice. The monster turned toward the sound.

A young man ran into the light of the hieroglyph. He was dressed in a heavy wool coat and a policeman's hat, with a rifle in his hands, but he couldn't have been much older than me. He was fairly drowning in his uniform. When he saw the monster, his eyes widened. He stumbled backward, almost dropping his weapon.

He yelled something at me in Russian, probably, "Why is there a two-headed snake monster with no bum?"

The monster hissed at both of us—which it could do, having two heads.

"That's a monster," I told the guard. I was fairly sure he couldn't understand, but I tried to keep my tone steady. "Stay calm and don't shoot. I'm trying to save my brother."

The guard swallowed. His large ears were the only things holding up his hat. He glanced from the monster to Carter to the *tyet* glowing above my head. Then he did something I wasn't expecting.

He said a word in Ancient Egyptian: *"Heqat"*—the command I always used to summon my staff. His rifle changed to a two-meter oaken rod with the carved head of a falcon.

Wonderful, I thought. The security guards are secretly magicians.

He addressed me in Russian—some sort of warning. I recognized the name *Menshikov.*

"Let me guess," I said. "You want to take me to your leader."

The *tjesu heru* snapped its jaws. It was rapidly losing its fear of my glowing *tyet.* Carter wasn't far enough away to make a run for it.

"Look," I told the guard, "your boss Menshikov is a traitor. He summoned this thing to kill us so we wouldn't blab about his plans to free Apophis. Savvy the word *Apophis*? Bad snake. Very bad snake! Now, either help me kill this monster or stay out of my way!"

The magician-guard hesitated. He pointed at me nervously. "Kane." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I agreed. "Kane."

His expression was a jumble of emotions—fear, disbelief, possibly even awe. I didn't know what he'd heard about us, but before he could decide whether to help us or fight us, the situation spun out of control.

The *tjesu heru* charged. My ridiculous brother—instead of rolling out of the way—tackled the monster.

He locked his arms around the creature's right neck and tried to climb its back, but the *tjesu heru* simply turned its other head to strike.

What was my brother thinking? Perhaps he thought he could ride the beast. Perhaps he was trying

to buy me a few seconds to cast a spell. If you ask him about it now, he'll claim he doesn't remember the incident at all. But if you ask me, the thickheaded fool was trying to save me, even if it meant sacrificing himself. The nerve!

[Oh, yes, *now* you try to explain yourself, Carter. I thought you didn't remember this bit! Just be quiet and let me tell the story.]

As I was saying, the *tjesu heru* struck at Carter, and everything seemed to slow down. I remember screaming, lowering my staff at the monster. The soldier-magician yelled something in Russian. The creature sank its fangs into Carter's left shoulder, and he dropped to the ground.

I forgot about my makeshift circle. I ran toward him, and my staff glowed. I don't know how I managed the power. As Isis said, I didn't think. I simply channeled all my rage and shock into my staff.

Seeing Carter hurt was the final insult. My grandparents had been possessed. My friends had been attacked, and my birthday ruined. But my brother was off-limits. No one was allowed to hurt my brother.

I unleashed a beam of golden light that hit the monster with the force of a sandblaster. The *tjesu heru* crumbled to bits, until there was nothing left but a streak of sand steaming in the snow and a few splinters of Menshikov's shattered staff.

I ran to Carter's side. He was shivering, his eyes rolled back in his head. Two puncture wounds in his coat were smoking.

"Kane," the young Russian said with a tone of awe.

I snatched up a splinter of wood and held it for him to see. "Your boss Menshikov did this. He's working for Apophis. Menshikov: Apophis. Now, GET OUT!"

The magician may not have understood my words, but he got the message. He turned and ran.

I cradled Carter's head. I couldn't carry him by myself, but I had to get him out of here. We were in enemy territory. I needed to find Bes.

I struggled to get him to his feet. Then someone took Carter's other arm and helped us up. I found Set grinning at me, still in his ridiculous red disco suit, dusted with malachite rubble. Menshikov's broken white sunglasses were propped on his head.

"You," I said, too filled with loathing to issue a proper death threat.

"Me," Set agreed cheerily. "Let's get your brother out of here, shall we? Vladimir is *not* in a good mood."

The Nevsky Prospekt would've been a lovely place to shop if it hadn't been the wee hours of the morning during a snowstorm, and if I hadn't been carrying my poisoned, comatose brother. The street had wide pavements, perfect for strolling, lined with a dazzling assortment of high-end boutiques, cafés, churches, and mansions. With all the signs in Russian, I didn't see how I was going to find the chocolate shop. I couldn't spot Bes's black Mercedes anywhere.

Set volunteered to carry Carter, but I wasn't about to let the god of chaos take full charge of my brother, so we dragged him between us. Set chatted amiably about *tjesu heru* poison: "Completely incurable! Fatal in about twelve hours. It's amazing stuff!" And his tussle with Menshikov: "Six vases broken over his head, and he still survives! I envy his thick skull." And my prospects of living long enough to find Bes: "Oh, you're toast, my dear! A dozen senior magicians were rallying to Menshikov

when I made my, er, strategic retreat. They'll be after you shortly. I could've destroyed them all, of course, but I couldn't risk Vladimir using my secret name again. Maybe he'll get amnesia and forget it. Then if you die—that would be both problems solved. Oh, I'm sorry, I suppose that sounded insensitive. Come along!"

Carter's head lolled. His breathing sounded almost as bad as Vlad the Inhaler's.

Now, please don't think I was dense. Of course I remembered the wax mini-Carter figurine Jaz had given me. I recognized that this was just the sort of emergency where it might come in handy. How Jaz had predicted Carter would need healing, I had no idea. But it was possible the figurine could draw the poison out of him, despite what Set said about it being incurable. What does a god of evil know about healing, anyway?

There were problems, however. First, I knew very little about healing magic. I needed time to figure out the proper casting, and since I had only one wax statue, I couldn't afford to get it wrong. Second, I couldn't very well do that while being chased by Menshikov and his squad of magical Russian goons, nor did I want to let my guard down with Set anywhere near me. I didn't know why he'd decided to be helpful all of a sudden, but the sooner I could lose him, the better. I needed to find Bes and retreat to somewhere safe—if there was such a place.

Set kept chatting about all the exciting ways the magicians might kill me once they caught up. Finally I spotted a bridge up ahead over a frozen canal. Parked in the middle was the black Mercedes. Bes leaned against the hood, eating pieces off a chocolate chessboard. Next to him sat a large plastic bag—hopefully with more chocolate for me.

I yelled to him, but he was so engrossed in eating chocolate (which I suppose I could understand) that he didn't notice us until we were a few meters away. Then he looked up and saw Set.

I started to say, "Bes, don't—"

Too late. Like a skunk, the dwarf god activated his default defense. His eyes bulged out. His mouth opened impossibly wide. He yelled "BOO!" so loudly, my hair parted, and icicles rained down from the bridge's streetlamps.

Set didn't look the least bit fazed.

"Hello, Bes," he said. "Really, you're not so scary with chocolate smeared on your face."

Bes glared at me. "What's *he* doing here?"

"Not my idea!" I promised. I gave him the abbreviated story of our encounter with Menshikov.

"And so Carter's been hurt," I summed up, which seemed rather obvious. "We have to get him out of here."

"But first," Set interrupted, pointing at the Chocolate Museum bag next to Bes, "I can't stand surprises. What's in there? A gift for me?"

Bes frowned. "Sadie wanted a souvenir. I brought her Lenin's head."

Set slapped his thigh with delight. "Bes, how evil! There's hope for you yet."

"Not his *real* head," Bes said. "It's chocolate."

"Oh…shame. Can I have part of your chessboard, then? I simply love eating pawns."

"Get out of here, Set!" Bes said.

"Well, I could do that, but since our friends are on their way, I thought perhaps we should make a deal."

Set snapped his fingers, and a globe of red light appeared in front of him. In it, the holographic images of six men in security uniforms piled into two white sports cars. Their headlights blazed to life. The cars swerved across a parking lot, then passed straight through a stone wall as if it were made of smoke.

"I'd say you have about two minutes." Set smiled, and the globe of light faded. "You remember Menshikov's minions, Bes. Are you sure you want to meet them again?"

The dwarf god's face darkened. He crushed a white chocolate chess piece in his hand. "You lying, scheming, murdering—"

"Stop!" I said.

Carter groaned in his poisoned daze. Either he was getting heavier, or I was getting tired of holding him up.

"We don't have time to argue," I said. "Set, are you offering to stop the magicians?"

He laughed. "No, no. I'm still hoping they'll kill you, you see. But I was going to offer you the location of the last scroll in the Book of Ra. That *is* what you're after, isn't it?"

I assumed he was lying. He usually was—but if he was serious…

I looked at Bes. "Is it possible he knows the location?"

Bes grunted. "More than possible. The priests of Ra *gave* him the scroll for safekeeping."

"Why on earth would they do that?"

Set tried to look modest. "Come now, Sadie. I was a loyal lieutenant of Ra. If you were Ra, and you didn't want to be bothered by any old magician trying to wake you, wouldn't you trust the key to your location with your most fearsome servant?"

He had a point. "Where's the scroll, then?"

"Not so fast. I'll give you the location if *you* give me back my secret name."

"Not likely!"

"It's quite simple. Just say 'I give you back your name.' You'll forget the proper way to say it—"

"And then I'll have no power over you! You'll kill me!"

"You'd have my word that I won't."

"Right. That's worth a lot. What if I used your secret name to *force* you to tell me?"

Set shrugged. "With a few days to research the correct spell, you might manage that. Unfortunately…" He cupped his ear to his hand. In the distance, tires squealed—two cars, traveling fast, getting closer. "You don't have a few days."

Bes cursed in Egyptian. "Don't do it, girl. He can't be trusted."

"Can we find the scroll without him?"

"Well…maybe. Probably not. No."

The headlights of two cars swerved onto the Nevsky Prospekt, roughly half a mile away. We were out of time. I had to get Carter away from here, but if Set really was our only way of finding the scroll, I couldn't just let him go.

"All right, Set. But I'll give you one last order."

Bes sighed. "I can't bear to watch this. Give me your brother. I'll put him in the car."

The dwarf took Carter and stuffed him into the backseat of the Mercedes.

I kept my eyes on Set, trying to think of the *least* terrible way to make this deal. I couldn't simply tell him to *never* hurt my family. A magical pact needed to be carefully worded, with clear limits and an expiration date, or the whole spell would unravel. "*Evil Day,* you are not to harm the Kane family. You'll maintain a truce with us at least until—until Ra has been awakened."

"Or until you try and *fail* to awaken him?" Set asked innocently.

"If that happens," I said, "the world is going to end. So why not? I will do what you ask concerning your name. In exchange, you will tell me the location of the last part of the Book of Ra, without trickery or deception. Then you'll depart for the Duat."

Set considered the offer. The two white sports cars were only a few blocks away now. Bes shut Carter's door and ran back over.

"We have a deal," Set agreed. "You'll find the scroll at Bahariya. Bes knows the place I mean."

Bes didn't look happy. "That place is heavily protected. We'll have to use the Alexandria portal."

"Yes." Set grinned. "Should be interesting! How long can you hold your breath, Sadie Kane?"

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind, never mind. Now, I believe you owe me a secret name."

"I give you back your name," I said. Just like that, I felt the magic leave me. I still knew Set's name: Evil Day. But somehow I couldn't remember exactly how I used to say it, or how it worked in a spell. The memory had been erased.

To my surprise, Set didn't kill me on the spot. He just smiled and tossed me Vlad Menshikov's sunglasses. "I hope you live, after all, Sadie Kane. You're quite amusing. But if they do kill you, at least enjoy the experience!"

"Gosh, thanks."

"And just because I like you so much, I have a free piece of information for your brother. Tell him Zia Rashid's village was called Makan al-Ramal al-Hamrah."

"Why is that—"

"Happy travels!" Set disappeared in a cloud of blood-colored mist. A block away, the two white sports cars barreled toward us. A magician stuck his head out the sunroof of the lead car and pointed his staff in our direction.

"Time to leave," Bes said. "Get in!"

I will say this for Bes: he drove like a maniac. And I mean that in the best possible way. Icy streets didn't bother him at all. Neither did traffic signals, pedestrian pavements, or canals, which he twice jumped without bothering to find a bridge. Fortunately, the city was mostly empty that time of morning, or I'm sure we would have mowed down any number of Russians.

We wove through central St. Petersburg while the two white sports cars closed behind us. I tried to hold Carter steady next to me in the backseat. His eyes were half-open, his corneas the most awful shade of green. Despite the cold, he was burning with fever. I managed to tug off his winter coat and found his shirt soaked with sweat. On his shoulder, the puncture wounds were oozing like… Well, it's probably best I don't describe that part.

I glanced behind us. The magician in the sunroof aimed his staff—not an easy task in a high-speed car chase—and a glowing white javelin shot from the tip, hurtling toward us like a homing missile.

"Duck!" I yelled, and pushed Carter against the seat.

The javelin broke the rear window and flew straight through the windshield. If Bes had been normal height, he would have gotten a free head piercing. As it was, the projectile missed him completely.

"I'm a dwarf," he grumbled. "I don't duck!"

He swerved to the right. Behind us, a storefront exploded. Looking back, I saw the entire wall dissolve into a pile of living snakes. Our pursuers were still closing.

"Bes, get us out of here!" I yelled.

"I'm trying, kid. Egyptian Bridge is coming up. It was originally built in the eighteen hundreds, but—"

"I don't care! Just drive!"

Truly, it's amazing how many Egyptian bits and bobs there are in St. Petersburg, and how *little* I cared about them. Being chased by evil magicians throwing javelins and snake bombs does tend to clarify one's priorities.

Suffice it to say: Yes, there really is an Egyptian Bridge over the Fontanka River, leading south out of central St. Petersburg. Why? No idea. Don't care. As we raced toward it, I saw black stone sphinxes on either side—lady sphinxes with gilded pharaoh crowns—but the only thing that mattered to me was that they could summon a portal.

Bes barked something in Egyptian. At the top of the bridge, blue light flashed. A swirling sand vortex appeared.

"What did Set mean," I asked, "about holding my breath?"

"Hopefully won't be for long," Bes said. "We'll only be thirty feet under."

"Thirty feet under *water*?"

BANG! The Mercedes careened sideways. Only later did I realize another javelin must have hit our back tire. We spun across the ice and flipped, sliding upside-down into the vortex.

My head slammed against something. I opened my eyes, fighting for consciousness, but either I was blind or we were in complete darkness. I heard water trickling through the javelin-shattered glass, and the roof of the Mercedes crumpling like an aluminum can.

I had time to think: *A teenager for less than a day, and I'm going to drown.*

Then I blacked out.

SADIE

12. I Master the Fine Art of Name-Calling

IT'S DISTURBING TO WAKE UP as a chicken.

My *ba* floated through dark water. My glowing wings flapped as I tried to figure out which way was up. I assumed my body was somewhere close by, possibly already drowned in the back of the Mercedes, but I couldn't figure out how to return to it.

Why on earth had Bes driven us through an underwater portal? I hoped poor Carter had somehow survived; perhaps Bes was able to pull him free. But dying from poison rather than drowning didn't seem much of an improvement.

A current caught me and whisked me into the Duat. The water changed into cold fog. Wailing and growling filled the darkness. My acceleration slowed, and when the mist dissipated, I was back in Brooklyn House, floating just outside the infirmary door. On a bench against the wall, sitting together like old friends, were Anubis and Walt Stone. They looked like they were waiting for bad news. Walt's hands were folded in his lap. His shoulders slumped. He'd changed clothes—a new sleeveless tee, a new pair of running shorts—but he looked like he hadn't slept since returning from London.

Anubis talked to him in soothing tones, as if trying to ease his grief. I'd never seen Anubis in traditional Egyptian clothes before: bare-chested with a gold and ruby collar around his neck, a simple black kilt wrapped around his waist. It wasn't a look I'd recommend for most guys, but Anubis pulled it off. I'd always imagined he would look rather skinny with his shirt off (not that I imagined that a lot, mind you) but he was in excellent shape. They must've had quite a good gym in the underworld, bench-pressing tombstones and whatnot.

At any rate, after the shock of seeing them together, my first thought was that something terrible must've happened to Jaz.

"What is it?" I asked, not sure if they could hear me. "What's happened?"

Walt didn't react, but Anubis looked up. As usual my heart did a little happy dance quite without my permission. His eyes were so mesmerizing, I completely forgot how to use my brain.

I said, *"Um."*

I know, Liz would've been proud.

"Sadie," Anubis said. "You shouldn't be here. Carter is dying."

That jarred me back to my senses. "I know that, jackal boy! I didn't *ask* to be—Wait, why *am* I here?"

Anubis pointed at the door of the infirmary. "I suspect Jaz's spirit called to you."

"Is she dead? Am *I* dead?"

"Neither," Anubis said. "But you are both on death's doorstep, which means your souls can speak to each other quite easily. Just don't stay long."

Walt still hadn't acknowledged me. He muttered: "Couldn't tell her. Why couldn't I tell her?" He opened his hands. Cradled in his palms was a golden *shen* amulet exactly like the one he'd given me.

"Anubis, what's wrong with him?" I asked. "Can't he hear me?"

Anubis put his hand on Walt's shoulder. "He can't see either of us, though I think he can sense my presence. He called to me for guidance. That's why I'm here."

"Guidance from you? Why?"

I suppose it sounded harsher than I intended, but of all the gods Walt might've called, Anubis seemed the least likely choice.

Anubis looked up at me, his eyes even more melancholy than usual.

"You should pass on now, Sadie," he said. "You have very little time. I promise I'll do my best to ease Walt's pain."

"His pain?" I asked. "Hang on—"

But the infirmary door swung open, and the currents of the Duat pulled me inside.

The infirmary was the nicest medical facility I'd ever been in, but that wasn't saying much. I hated hospitals. My father used to joke that I was born screaming and didn't stop until they got me out of the maternity ward. I was mortally afraid of needles, pills, and above all the smell of *sick* people. Dead people and cemeteries? Those didn't bother me. But sickness…well, I'm sorry, but does it have to smell so bloody *sick*?

My first visit to Jaz in the infirmary had taken all my courage. This second time, even in *ba* form, wasn't any easier.

The room was about the size of my bedroom. The walls were rough-hewn limestone. Large windows let in the nighttime glow of New York. Cedar cabinets were carefully labeled with medicines, first aid supplies, magical charms and potions. In one corner stood a fountain with a life-size statue of the lion goddess Sekhmet, patron of healers. I'd heard that the water pouring through Sekhmet's hands could cure a cold or flu instantly, and provide most of one's daily vitamins and iron, but I'd never had the courage to take a drink.

The gurgle of the fountain was peaceful enough. Instead of antiseptic, the air smelled of charmed vanilla-scented candles that floated around the room. But still, the place made me jumpy.

I knew the candles monitored the patients' conditions. Their flames changed color to indicate problems. At the moment, they all hovered around the only occupied bed—Jaz's. Their flames were dark orange.

Jaz's hands were folded on her chest. Her blond hair was combed across her pillow. She smiled faintly as if she were having a pleasant dream.

And sitting at the foot of Jaz's bed was…Jaz, or at least a shimmering green image of my friend. It wasn't a *ba*. The form was fully human. I wondered if she'd died after all, and this was her ghost.

"Jaz…" A wave of fresh guilt washed over me. Everything that had gone wrong the past two days had started with Jaz's sacrifice, which was my fault. "Are you—"

"Dead? No, Sadie. This is my *ren*."

Her transparent body flickered. When I looked more closely, I saw it was composed of images, like a 3-D video of Jaz's life. Toddler Jaz sat in a high chair, painting her face with baby food. Twelve-year-old Jaz cartwheeled across a gymnasium floor, trying out for her first cheerleading squad. Present-day Jaz opened her school locker and found a glowing *djed* amulet —our magical calling card that had led her to Brooklyn.

"Your *ren,"* I said. "Another part of your soul?"

The glowing green image nodded. "Egyptians believed there were five different parts of the soul. The *ba* is the personality. The *ren* is—"

"Your name," I remembered. "But how can *that* be your name?"

"My name is my identity," she said. "The sum of my experiences. As long as my name is remembered, I still exist, even if I die. Do you understand?"

I didn't, even remotely. But I understood she might die, and that it was my fault.

"I'm so sorry." I tried not to break into tears. "If I hadn't grabbed that stupid scroll—"

"Sadie, don't be sorry. I'm glad you've come."

"But—"

"Everything happens for a reason, Sadie, even bad things."

"That's not true!" I said. "It's bloody unfair!"

How could Jaz be so calm and nice, even when she was in a coma? I didn't want to hear that bad things happened as part of some grand plan. I *hated* when people said that. I'd lost my mother. I'd lost my dad. My life had been turned upside down, and I'd almost died countless times. Now, as far as I knew, I *was* dead or dying. My brother was poisoned and drowning, and I couldn't help him.

"No reason is worth all this," I said. "Life is random. It's harsh. It's—it's—"

Jaz was still smiling, looking a bit amused.

"Oh," I said. "You wanted to make me mad, didn't you?"

"That's the Sadie we all love. Grief really isn't productive. You do better when you're angry."

"Humph." I supposed she was right, but I didn't have to like it. "So why did you bring me here?"

"Two things," she said. "First, you're not dead. When you wake up, you'll only have a few minutes to heal Carter. You'll have to act quickly."

"Using the wax statue," I said. "Yes, I figured that out. But I don't know *how.* I'm no good at healing."

"There is only one more ingredient that matters. You know what it is."

"But I don't!"

Jaz raised an eyebrow like I was just being stubborn. "You're so close to understanding, Sadie. Think about Isis. Think about how you channeled her power in St. Petersburg. The answer will come to you."

"But—"

"We must hurry. The second thing: you're going to need Walt's help. I know it's risky. I know Bes warned against it. But use the amulet to call Walt back to you. It's what he wants. Some risks are worth taking, even if it means losing a life."

"Losing *whose* life? His?"

The infirmary scene began to dissolve, turning into a blurry watercolor.

"Think about Isis," Jaz repeated. "And Sadie…there *is* a purpose. You taught us that. We choose to believe in Ma'at. We create order out of chaos, beauty and meaning out of ugly randomness. That's what Egypt is all about. That's why its name, its *ren,* has endured for millennia. Don't despair. Otherwise Chaos wins."

I remembered saying something like that in one of our classes, but even then, I hadn't believed it.

"I'll let you in on a secret," I said. "I'm a rubbish teacher."

Jaz's form, all her collected memories, slowly melted into mist. "I'll let *you* in on a secret," she said, her voice fading. "You were an excellent teacher. Now, visit Isis, and see how it began."

The infirmary evaporated. Suddenly I was on a royal barge, floating down the Nile. The sun blazed overhead. Lush green marsh grass and palm trees lined the riverbanks. Beyond that the desert spread to the horizon—barren red hills so dry and forbidding, they might as well have been on Mars.

The boat was like the one Carter had described from his vision with Horus, though in better condition. Its crisp white sail was emblazoned with the image of the sun disk, glittering in red and gold. Orbs of multicolored light zipped around the deck, manning the oars and pulling the lines. How they did this without hands, I don't know, but it wasn't the first time I'd seen such a magical crew.

The hull was inlaid with precious metals—copper, silver, and gold designs showing pictures of the boat's journey through the Duat, and hieroglyphs invoking the power of the sun.

In the middle of the boat, a blue-and-gold canopy shaded the sun god's throne, which was without a doubt the most impressive and uncomfortable looking chair I'd ever seen. At first I thought it was molten gold. Then I realized it was fashioned out of living fire—yellow flames that had somehow been sculpted into the shape of a throne. Etched into its legs and armrests, white-hot hieroglyphs glowed so brightly they seared my eyes.

The throne's occupant wasn't quite so impressive. Ra was an old leathery man bent over in the shape of a question mark, his bald scalp cratered with liver spots and his face so saggy and wrinkled it looked like a mask. Only his kohl-lined eyes gave any indication he was alive, because they were full of pain and weariness. He wore a kilt and collar, which did not suit him *nearly* as well as it had Anubis. Until now, the most ancient person I'd ever seen was Iskandar, the former Chief Lector, who'd been two thousand years old. But Iskandar had never looked this bad, even when he was about to die. To make matters worse, Ra's left leg was wrapped in bandages and swollen to twice its proper size.

He groaned and propped his leg on a pile of cushions. Two puncture wounds oozed through the bandages on his shin—very much like the fang marks on Carter's shoulder. As Ra kneaded his leg, green venom spread up the veins of his thigh. Just looking at it made my *ba* feathers shiver with revulsion.

Ra looked to the heavens. His eyes turned molten yellow like his throne.

"Isis!" he cried. "Very well! I relent!"

A shadow rippled under the canopy. A woman appeared, and knelt before the throne. I recognized her, of course. She had long, dark hair cut Cleopatra-style and a white gossamer dress that complemented her graceful figure. Her luminous rainbow wings shimmered like the northern lights.

With her head bowed and her palms raised in supplication, she looked like the picture of

humility; but I knew Isis too well. I could see the smile she was trying to hide. I could sense her elation.

"Lord Ra," she said. "I live to serve you."

"Ha!" Ra said. "You live for power, Isis. Don't try to deceive me. I know you created the snake that bit me! That's why no one else can find a cure. You desire my throne for your husband, the upstart Osiris."

Isis started to protest, "My lord—"

"Enough! If I were a younger god—" Ra made the mistake of moving his leg. He yelped in pain. The green venom spread farther up his veins.

"Never mind." He sighed miserably. "I am weary of this world. Enough scheming and plotting. Just cure the poison."

"Gladly, my king. But I will need—"

"My secret name," Ra said. "Yes, I know. Promise to heal me, and you will get all you desire… and more."

I heard the warning in Ra's voice, but either Isis didn't notice, or she didn't care.

"I swear to heal you," she said.

"Then approach, goddess."

Isis leaned forward. I thought Ra would whisper his name in her ear, but instead he grasped her hand and placed it against his withered brow. Her fingertips smoldered. She tried to pull away, but Ra held her wrist. The sun god's entire form glowed with fiery images of his long life: the first dawn; his sun boat shining on the newly risen land of Egypt; the creation of the other gods and mortal men; Ra's endless battles with Apophis as he passed through the Duat each night, keeping Chaos at bay. It was too much to take in—centuries passing with each heartbeat. His secret name was the sum of his experience, and even then, in those ancient times, Ra was unthinkably old. The fiery aura spread to Isis's hand, traveling up her arm until her whole body was wreathed in flames. She screamed once. Then the fires died. Isis collapsed, smoke curling from her dress.

"So," Ra said. "You survived."

I couldn't tell if he felt disappointment or grudging respect.

Isis rose unsteadily to her feet. She looked shell-shocked, as if she'd just strolled through a war zone, but she raised her hand. A fiery hieroglyph burned on her palm—Ra's secret name, distilled into a single unbelievably powerful word.

She placed her hand on Ra's poisoned leg and spoke a spell. The green venom retreated from his veins. The swelling subsided. The bandages fell away, and the two fang marks closed.

Ra reclined on his throne and sighed with relief. "At last. No pain."

"My lord needs rest," Isis suggested. "A long, long rest."

The sun god opened his eyes. There was no fire in them now. They looked like the milky eyes of a mortal old man.

"Bast!" he called.

The cat goddess materialized at his side. She was dressed in Egyptian armor of leather and iron, and she seemed younger, though perhaps that was just because she hadn't yet endured centuries in a prison abyss, fighting Apophis. I was tempted to shout to her and warn her about what was coming,

but my voice wouldn't work.

Bast gave Isis sideways look. "My lord, is this…*woman* bothering you?"

Ra shook his head. "Nothing will bother me much longer, my faithful cat. Come with me now. We have important matters to discuss before I depart."

"My lord? Where are you going?"

"Into forced retirement." Ra glared at Isis. "That *is* what you want, goddess of magic?"

Isis bowed.

"Never, my lord!" Bast drew her knives and stepped toward Isis, but Ra held out his arm.

"Enough, Bast," he said. "I have another fight in mind for you—one last, crucial fight. As for you, Isis, you may think you have won because you mastered my secret name. Do you realize what you've started? Osiris may become pharaoh, but his reign will be short and bitter. *His* royal seat will be a pale reflection of my throne of fire. This boat will no longer ride the Duat. The balance between Ma'at and Chaos will slowly degrade. Egypt itself will fall. The names of her gods will fade to a distant memory. Then one day, the entire world will stand on the brink of destruction. You will cry out to Ra, and I will not be there. When that day comes, remember how your greed and ambition caused it to happen."

"My lord." Isis bowed respectfully, but I knew she wasn't thinking about some distant future. She was drunk with her victory. She thought Osiris would rule Egypt forever, and that Ra was just an old fool. She did not know that in a short time, her victory would turn to tragedy. Osiris would be murdered by his brother, Set. And someday, Ra's other predictions would come true as well.

"Let us go, Bast," Ra said. "We are no longer wanted."

The throne erupted in a column of flames, burning away the blue-and-gold canopy. A ball of fire ascended into the heavens until it was lost in the glare of the sun.

When the smoke cleared, Isis stood alone and laughed with delight.

"I did it!" she exclaimed. "Osiris, you will be king! I mastered the secret name of Ra!"

I wanted to tell her she had mastered nothing, but I could only watch as Isis danced across the boat. She was so pleased with her own success, she paid no attention to the magical servant lights disappearing. The lines dropped. The sail went slack. Oars trailed in the water, and the sun boat drifted down the river, unmanned.

My vision faded, and I sank into darkness.

I woke in a soft bed. For a blissful moment, I thought I was back in my room at Brooklyn House. I could get up and have a lovely breakfast with my friends, Amos, Philip of Macedonia, and Khufu, then spend the day teaching our initiates how to turn each other into reptiles. That sounded brilliant.

But of course I wasn't home. I sat up, and my head began spinning. I was in a king-size bed with soft cotton sheets and a pile of feather pillows. The bedroom was quite posh, decorated in dazzling white, which did not help my dizziness. I felt as if I were back in the home of the sky goddess Nut. At any moment, the room might dissolve into clouds.

My legs felt stiff, but I managed to get out of bed. I was wearing one of those hotel robes so massive and plush, I looked like an albino Muppet. I staggered to the doorway and found a lovely living room, also bright white. Sliding glass doors led to a veranda that overlooked the sea from quite

a height—possibly fifteen or twenty stories. The sky and the water were gorgeous blue.

My eyes took a moment to adjust to the light. On a nearby table, Carter's and my few possessions were carefully laid out —our old rumpled clothes, our magic bags, and the two scrolls from the Book of Ra, along with Bes's bag from the Chocolate Museum.

Carter was wrapped in a white robe like mine. He lay on the couch with his eyes closed. His whole body shivered. Bes sat next to him, dabbing Carter's forehead with a cool cloth.

"How—how is he?" I managed.

Bes glanced over. He looked like a miniature tourist in a loud Hawaiian shirt, khaki shorts, and flip-flops. The ugly American—size extra-small.

"About time," he said. "I was beginning to think you'd never wake up."

I took a step forward, but the room tilted back and forth.

"Careful." Bes rushed over and took my arm. "You got a nasty bump on the head."

"Never mind that," I muttered. "I have to help Carter."

"He's bad, Sadie. I don't know if—"

"I can help. My wand, and the wax figurine—"

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. I'll get them."

With Bes's assistance, I wobbled to Carter's side. Bes fetched my things while I checked Carter's forehead. His fever was worse than before. The veins in his neck had turned green from the poison, just like Ra's had in my vision.

I frowned at Bes. "How long was I out?"

"It's almost noon on Tuesday." He spread my magic supplies at Carter's feet. "So, roughly twelve hours."

"*Twelve hours?* Bes, that's the *maximum* time Set thought Carter could stay alive before the poison killed him! Why didn't you wake me sooner?"

His face turned as red as his Hawaiian shirt. "I tried! I pulled you both out of the Mediterranean and got you to the hotel, didn't I? I used all the wake-up spells I know! You just kept muttering in your sleep about Walt, Anubis, secret names—"

"Fine!" I said. "Just help me—"

The doorbell rang.

Bes gestured for me to stay calm. He called out in another language—possibly Arabic—and a hotel waiter opened the door. He bowed low to Bes, as if the dwarf were a sultan, then brought in a room service cart loaded with tropical fruit, fresh-baked breads, and bottled sodas.

"Excellent," Bes told me. "Be right back."

"You're wasting time!" I snapped.

Naturally, Bes ignored me. He retrieved his bag from the dining table and brought out the chocolate head of Vladimir Lenin. The waiter's eyes widened. Bes put the head in the middle of the cart and nodded as if it made the perfect centerpiece.

Bes gave the waiter a few more orders in Arabic, then handed him some gold coins. The waiter groveled and generally looked terrified. He exited backward, still bowing.

"Where are we exactly?" I asked. "And why are you a king here?"

"Alexandria, Egypt," Bes said. "Sorry about the rough arrival. It's a tricky place to teleport to. Cleopatra's old capital, you know, where the Egyptian Empire fell apart, so magic tends to get twisted around. The only working portals are in the old city, which is off the coast, under thirty feet of water."

"And this place? Obviously a luxury hotel, but how did you—"

"Penthouse Suite, Four Seasons Alexandria." He sounded slightly embarrassed. "People in Egypt still remember the old gods, even if they won't admit it. I was popular back in the day, so I can usually call in favors when I need them. Sorry I didn't have more time. I could've gotten us a private villa."

"How dare you," I said. "Making us settle for a five-star hotel. Now, why don't you make sure we're not interrupted while I heal Carter?"

I grabbed the wax figurine Jaz had given me and knelt next to my brother. The statue was deformed from getting knocked around in my bag. Then again, Carter looked worse for wear, too. Hopefully the magic connection would still work.

"Carter," I said. "I'm going to heal you. But I need your help."

I put my hand on his feverish forehead. Now I knew why Jaz had appeared to me as a *ren,* the part of the soul that represented her name. I knew why she'd shown me the vision of Isis and Ra.

You're so close to understanding, Sadie, she'd said.

I'd never thought about it before, but the *ren* was the same as one's secret name. It was more than just special word. The secret name is your darkest thoughts, your most embarrassing moments, your biggest dreams, your worst fears, all wrapped together. It's the sum of your experiences, even those you'd never want to share. Your secret name makes you who you are.

That's why a secret name has power. It's also why you couldn't simply hear someone repeat a secret name and know how to use it. You had to *know* that person and understand their life. The more you understood the person, the more power their name could yield. You could only learn a secret name from the person himself—or from the person closest to his heart.

And heaven help me, for me Carter was that person.

Carter, I thought. *What is your secret name?*

Even in sickness, his mind resisted me. You don't just hand over your secret name. Every human had one, just as each god did; but most humans spent their whole lives not knowing that, not ever putting in words their most private identity. Understandable, really. Try summing up your entire existence in five words or less. Not exactly easy, is it?

"You can do this," I murmured. "You're my brother. I love you. All the embarrassing bits, all the annoying bits, which I imagine is *most* of you—a thousand Zias might run away from you if they knew the truth. But I won't. I'll still be here. Now, tell me your name, you big idiot, so I can save your life."

My hand tingled against his forehead. His life passed through my fingers—ghostly memories of when we were children, living with our parents in Los Angeles. I saw my birthday party when I turned six and the cake exploded. I saw our mother reading bedtime stories to us from a college science textbook; our dad playing jazz and dancing me around the room while Carter covered his ears and yelled, "Dad!" I saw moments I hadn't shared with my brother, as well: Carter and Dad caught in a riot in Paris; Carter and Zia talking by candlelight in the First Nome; Carter by himself in the library at Brooklyn House, staring at his Eye of Horus amulet and struggling against the temptation to reclaim

the power of a god. He'd never told me about that, but it made me feel relieved. I'd thought I was the only one who'd been so tempted.

Slowly, Carter relaxed. His worst fears passed through me, his most embarrassing secrets. His strength was failing as the poison gripped his heart. With his last bit of willpower, he told me his name.

[Of course, I won't tell you what it is. You couldn't use it anyway, hearing it from a recording, but I won't take chances.]

I raised the wax figurine and spoke Carter's secret name. Immediately, the poison receded from his veins. The wax figure turned green and melted in my hands. Carter's fever broke. He shuddered, took a deep breath, and opened his eyes.

"Right," I said sternly. "Don't *ever* ride another bloody snake monster again!"

"Sorry…" he croaked. "Did you just—"

"Yeah."

"With my secret name—"

"Yeah."

"And all my secrets—"

"Yeah."

He groaned and covered his face as if he wanted to fall back into a coma; but honestly, I had no intention of teasing him. There's a difference between keeping your brother in his place and being cruel. I *wasn't* cruel. Besides, after seeing into the darkest recesses of Carter's mind, I was a bit ashamed, possibly even in awe. There really wasn't much there. Compared to my fears and embarrassing secrets—oh, dear. He was *tame*. I hoped our situations were never reversed and he had to heal *me*.

Bes came over with Lenin's head tucked in the crook of his arm. He'd obviously been having a nibble, as Lenin's forehead was missing—victim of a frontal choco-lobotomy.

"Good work, Sadie!" He broke off Lenin's nose and offered it to Carter. "Here, boy. You've earned this."

Carter frowned. "Does chocolate have magic healing properties?"

Bes snorted. "If it did, I'd be the healthiest dwarf in the world. Nah. It just tastes good."

"And you'll need your strength," I added. "We have a lot to talk about."

Despite our looming deadline—as of tomorrow, only two more days until the equinox and the end of the world—Bes insisted we rest until the following morning. He warned that if Carter exerted himself physically or magically any sooner after being poisoned, it might well kill him.

Losing the time made me quite agitated, but after going to so much trouble to revive my brother, I rather wanted to keep him alive. And I'll admit I wasn't in much better shape. I was so drained magically myself, I don't think I could have moved farther than the veranda.

Bes called the front desk and ordered a personal shopper to buy us some new clothes and supplies in town. I'm not sure what the Arabic word is for *combat boots,* but the shopping lady managed to find a new pair. When she delivered our things, she tried to give the boots to Carter, then looked horrified when Bes pointed at me. I also got a supply of hair dye, a comfortable pair of jeans,

a cotton top in desert camouflage colors, and a headscarf that was probably all the rage with Egyptian women, but which I decided not to wear, as it would probably clash with the new purple highlights I wanted for my hair.

Carter got jeans, boots, and a T-shirt that read *Property of Alexandria University* in English and Arabic. Clearly, even personal shoppers had him pegged as a complete geek.

The shopper also managed to find some supplies for our magic bags—blocks of wax, twine, even some papyrus and ink—though I doubt Bes explained to her what they were for.

After she left, Bes, Carter and I ordered more food from room service. We sat on the deck and watched the afternoon go by. The breeze from the Mediterranean was cool and pleasant. Modern Alexandria stretched out to our left—an odd mix of gleaming high-rises, shabby, crumbling buildings, and ancient ruins. The shoreline highway was dotted with palm trees and crowded with every sort of vehicle from BMWs to donkeys. From our penthouse suite, it all seemed a bit unreal—the raw energy of the city, the bustle and congestion below —while we sat on our veranda in the sky eating fresh fruit and the last melting bits of Lenin's head.

I wondered if this was how the gods felt, watching the mortal world from their throne room in the Duat.

As we talked, I set the two scrolls from the Book of Ra on the patio table. They looked so plain and harmless, yet we'd almost died retrieving them. Still one more to find, then the *real* fun would begin—figuring out how to use them to awaken Ra. It seemed impossible we could do so much in forty-eight hours, yet here we sat, sidelined and exhausted, forced to rest until the morning. Carter and his bloody heroics, getting bitten by that Doctor Dolittle snake…and he calls *me* impulsive. Meanwhile, Amos and our rookie initiates were left alone at Brooklyn House, preparing to defend against Vlad Menshikov, a magician so ruthless, he was on a secret-name basis with the god of evil.

I told Carter what had happened in St. Petersburg after he got poisoned—how I'd given up Set's name in exchange for the location of the last scroll: someplace called Bahariya. I described my vision of Anubis and Walt, my chat with Jaz's spirit, and my trip back in time to Ra's sun barge. The only thing I held back: what Set had said about Zia's village being named al-Hamrah Makan. And yes, I know that was wrong —but I'd just been inside Carter's head. I now understood how important Zia was to him. I knew how badly *any* information about her would rattle him.

Carter sat in his lounge chair and listened intently. His color had returned to normal. His eyes were clear and alert. It was hard to believe he'd been on death's door only hours before. I wanted to credit my healing powers, but I had a feeling his recovery had just as much to do with rest, several ginger ales, and a room-service cheeseburger with chips.

"Bahariya…" He looked at Bes. "I know that name. Why do I know that name?"

Bes scratched his beard. He'd been glum and silent since I'd recounted our conversation with Set. The name Bahariya seemed especially to bother him.

"It's an oasis," he said, "way out in the desert. The mummies buried there were a secret until 1996. Then some fool donkey put its leg through a hole in the ground and broke open the top of a tomb."

"Right!" Carter beamed at me, that *Gee, history is cool!* light in his eyes, so I knew he must be feeling better. "It's called the Valley of the Golden Mummies."

"I like gold," I said. "Mummies—not so much."

"Oh, you just haven't met enough mummies," Bes said.

I couldn't tell if he was joking, and I decided not to ask. "So the last scroll is hidden there?"

Bes shrugged. "It would make sense. The oasis is out of the way. Wasn't found until recently. There are also powerful curses in place to prevent portal travel. The mortal archaeologists have excavated some of the tombs, but there's still a huge network of tunnels and chambers no one's opened in thousands of years. *Lots* of mummies."

I imagined horror film mummies with their arms out and their linen wraps coming undone, groaning as they chased screaming starlets and strangled archaeologists.

"When you say *lots* of mummies," I ventured, "how many is lots?"

"They've uncovered a few hundred," Bes said, "out of maybe ten thousand."

"Ten thousand?" I looked at Carter, who didn't seem bothered by this at all.

"Sadie," he said, "it's not like they're going to come to life and kill you."

"No," Bes agreed. "Probably not. Almost for sure not."

"Thanks," I muttered. "I feel much better."

(Yes, I know what I said earlier about dead people and cemeteries not bothering me. But ten thousand mummies? That was pushing it.)

"Anyway," Bes said, "most of the mummies are from Roman times. They're not even properly Egyptian. Bunch of Latin wannabes trying to get into *our* afterlife because it's cooler. But some of the older tombs…well, we'll just have to see. With two parts of the Book of Ra, you should be able to track down the third part once you get close enough."

"How, exactly?" I asked.

Bes shrugged. "When magic items get broken up, the pieces are like magnets. The closer they get, the more they attract each other."

That didn't necessarily make me feel better. I imagined myself running through a tunnel with flaming scrolls stuck to both hands.

"Right," I said. "So all we have to do is creep through a network of tombs past ten thousand golden mummies, who probably, almost for sure, won't come to life and kill us."

"Yeah," Bes said. "Well, they're not really solid gold. Most of them are just painted with gold. But, yeah."

"That makes a huge difference."

"Then it's decided." Carter sounded positively thrilled. "We can leave in the morning. How far is it?"

"A little over two hundred miles," Bes said, "but the roads are iffy. And portals…well, like I said, the oasis is cursed against them. And even if it wasn't, we're back in the First Nome. It would be wise to use as little magic as possible. If you're discovered in Desjardins' home territory…"

He didn't need to finish that sentence.

I gazed at the skyline of Alexandria curving along the shore of the glittering Mediterranean. I tried to picture it as it might've been in ancient times, before Cleopatra, Egypt's final pharaoh, chose the wrong side in a Roman civil war and lost her life and her kingdom. This was the city where Ancient Egypt had died. It didn't seem a very auspicious place to start a quest.

Unfortunately, I had no choice. I'd have to travel two hundred miles through the desert to some isolated oasis and find one needle of a scroll in a haystack of mummies. I didn't see how we could accomplish this in the time we had left.

Worse, I hadn't yet told Carter my last bit of information about Zia's village. I could just keep my mouth shut. That would be the selfish thing. It might even be the right thing, as I needed his help, and I couldn't afford to have him distracted.

But I couldn't keep it from him. I'd invaded his mind and learned his secret name. The least I could do was be honest with him.

"Carter…there's something else. Set wanted you to know. Zia's village was named Makan al-Ramal al-Hamrah."

Carter turned a bit green again. "You just forgot to mention this?"

"Remember, Set is a liar," I said. "He wasn't being helpful. He volunteered the information because he wanted to cause chaos between us."

I could already tell I was losing him. His mind was caught in a strong current that had been pulling him along since January—the idea that he could save Zia. Now that I'd been in his mind, I knew he wouldn't rest—he *couldn't* rest—until he'd found her. It went far beyond liking the girl. He'd convinced himself she was part of his destiny.

One of his darker secrets? Deep down, Carter still resented our father for failing to save our mum, even though she had died for a noble cause, and even though it was her choice to sacrifice herself. Carter simply could *not* fail Zia in the same way, no matter what the stakes. He needed someone to believe in him, someone to save—and he was convinced Zia was that person. Sorry, a little sister just wouldn't do.

It hurt me, especially since I didn't agree with him, but I knew better than to argue. It would only push him farther away.

"Makan al-Ramal al-Hamrah…" he said. "My Arabic isn't very good. But Hamrah is red."

"Yes," Bes agreed. "Al-Ramal means 'the sands.'"

Carter's eyes widened. "The Place of Red Sands! The voice at the Brooklyn Museum said Zia was asleep at the Place of Red Sands." He looked at me pleadingly. "Sadie, it's the ruins of her home village. *That's* where Iskandar hid her. We have to find her."

Just like that: the fate of the world goes out the window. We have to find Zia.

I could have pointed out several things: He was going on the word of an evil spirit that was probably speaking directly from Apophis. If Apophis knew where Zia was kept, why would he tell us, except to delay and distract us? And if he wanted Zia dead, why hadn't he killed her already? Also, Set had given us the name al-Hamrah Makan. Set was *never* up to any good. He was clearly hoping to divide us. Finally, even if we had the name of the village, that didn't mean we could find it. The place had been wiped out almost a decade ago.

But looking at Carter, I realized there was no reasoning with him. This wasn't a reasonable choice. He saw a chance to save Zia, and he was going to take it.

I simply said, "It's a bad idea." And yes, it felt *quite* strange being forced to play the responsible sibling.

Carter turned to Bes. "Could you find this village?"

The dwarf god tugged at his Hawaiian shirt. "Maybe, but it would take time. You've got a little more than two days left. The equinox starts the day after tomorrow at sunset. Getting to the oasis of Bahariya is a full day of travel. Finding this ruined village—easily another day—and if it's on the Nile, it's in the opposite direction. Once you've got the Book of Ra, you'll need to allow another day at least to figure out how to use it. I guarantee awakening Ra will mean a trip into the Duat, where time is always unpredictable. You'll have to be back with Ra at dawn on the equinox—"

"We don't have enough time," I summed up. "It's either the Book of Ra, or Zia."

Why did I press Carter, when I knew what he was going to say?

"I can't leave her." He looked at the sun, now dipping toward in the horizon. "She's got a part to play, Sadie. I don't know what it is, but she's important. We can't lose her."

I waited. It was obvious what had to happen, but Carter wasn't going to say it.

I took a deep breath. "We'll have to separate. You and Bes go after Zia. I'll track down the scroll."

Bes coughed. "Speaking of bad ideas…"

Carter couldn't look me in the eyes. I knew he cared about me. He didn't want to be rid of me, but I could sense his relief. He wanted to be released from his responsibilities so he could hunt down Zia. "You saved my life," he said. "I can't let you go alone into the desert."

I unclasped my *shen* necklace. "I won't go alone. Walt offered to help."

"He can't," Bes said.

"But you won't tell me why," I said.

"I—" Bes faltered. "Look, I promised Bast I'd watch you, keep you safe."

"And I expect you to watch Carter very well. He'll need you to find this village. As for me, Walt and I can manage."

"But—"

"Whatever Walt's bloody secret is, whatever you're trying to protect him from, it's making him miserable. He wants to help. And I'm going to let him."

The dwarf glared at me, possibly wondering if he could yell *BOO!* and win the argument. I suppose he realized I was too stubborn.

He sighed in resignation. "Two young people traveling alone through Egypt…a boy and a girl. It'll look strange."

"I'll just say Walt's my brother."

Carter winced. I hadn't meant to be harsh, but I suppose the comment was a bit hurtful. Looking back, I'm sorry for that, but at the time I was terrified and angry. Carter was putting me in an impossible position.

"Go," I said firmly. "Save Zia."

Carter tried to read my expression, but I avoided looking at him. This was not the time for us to have one of our silent conversations. He didn't really want to know what I was thinking.

"How will we find each other?" he asked.

"Let's meet back here," I suggested. "We'll leave at dawn. Allow ourselves twenty-four hours, no longer, for me to find the scroll, you to find Zia's village, and both of us get back to Alexandria."

Bes grunted. “Not enough time. Even if everything goes perfectly, that’ll leave you about twelve hours to put together the Book of Ra and use it before the eve of the equinox.”

He was right. It was impossible.

Yet Carter nodded. “It’s our only chance. We have to try.”

He looked at me hopefully, but I think I knew even then that we wouldn’t meet in Alexandria. We were the Kanes, which meant *everything* would go wrong.

“Fine,” I muttered. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I should go pack.”

I walked inside before I could start crying.

CARTER

13. I Get a Demon Up My Nose

AT THIS POINT, I SHOULD CHANGE my secret name to *Embarrassed to Death by Sister,* because that pretty much sums up my existence.

I'm going skip over our travel preparations, how Sadie summoned Walt and explained the situation, how Bes and I said our farewells at dawn and rented a car from one of Bes's "reliable friends," and how that car broke down halfway to Cairo.

Basically, I'm going to skip to the part where Bes and I were rumbling along a dusty road in the back of a pickup truck driven by some Bedouins, looking for a village that no longer existed.

By this point it was late afternoon, and I was starting to think Bes's estimate of needing one day to find al-Hamrah Makan was way too optimistic. With each hour we wasted, my heart felt heavier. I'd risked everything to help Zia. I'd left Amos and our initiates alone at Brooklyn House to defend against the most evil magician in the world. I'd left my sister to continue the quest for the last scroll without me. If I failed to find Zia…well, I *couldn't* fail.

Traveling with professional nomads had some advantages. For one thing, the Bedouins knew every village, farm, and dusty crossroads in Egypt. They were happy to stop and ask the locals about the vanished village we were seeking.

For another thing, the Bedouins revered Bes. They treated him as a living good-luck charm. When we stopped for lunch (which took two hours to make), the Bedouins even gave us the best part of the goat. As far as I could tell, the best part of the goat wasn't too different from the worst part of the goat, but I suppose it was a big honor.

The bad thing about traveling with Bedouins? They weren't in a hurry. It took us all day to wind our way south along the Nile Valley. The journey was hot and boring. In the back of the truck, I couldn't even talk to Bes without getting a mouthful of sand, so I had way too much time to think.

Sadie described my obsession pretty well. The moment she'd given me the name of Zia's village, I couldn't focus on anything else. Of course, I figured it was some sort of trick. Apophis was trying to divide us and keep us from succeeding on our quest. But I also believed he was telling the truth, if only because the truth is what would rattle me the most. He had destroyed Zia's village when she was a child—for what reason, I didn't know. Now she was hidden there in a magic sleep. Unless I saved her, Apophis would kill her.

Why hadn't he killed her already if he knew where she was? I wasn't sure—and that bothered me. Maybe he didn't have the power yet. Maybe he didn't want to. After all, if he was trying to lure me into a trap, she was the best bait. Whatever the case, Sadie was right: it wasn't a rational choice for me. I *had* to save Zia.

Despite that, I felt like a creep for leaving Sadie on her own yet again. First I'd let her go off to London even though I knew it was a bad idea. Now I'd sent her to track down a scroll in a catacomb full of mummies. Sure, Walt would help her, and she could usually take care of herself. But a good brother would have stayed with her. Sadie had just saved my life, and I was like, "Great. See you later. Have fun with the mummies."

I'll just say Walt is my brother.

Ouch.

If I'm honest with myself, Zia wasn't the only reason I was anxious to go off on my own. I was in shock that Sadie had discovered my secret name. Suddenly she knew me better than anyone in the world. I felt like she'd opened me up on the surgery table, examined me, and sewn me back together. My first instinct was to run away, to put as much distance between us as possible.

I wondered if Ra had felt the same way when Isis learned his name—if that was the real reason he went into exile: complete humiliation.

Also, I needed time to process what Sadie had accomplished. For months we'd been trying to relearn the path of the gods. We'd struggled to figure out how the ancient magicians tapped the gods' powers without getting possessed or overwhelmed. Now I suspected Sadie had found the answer. It had something to do with a god's *ren*.

A secret name wasn't just a name, like a magic word. It was the sum of the god's experiences. The more you understood the god, the closer you got to knowing their secret name, and the more you could channel their power.

If that was true, then the path of the gods was basically sympathetic magic—finding a similarity between two things, like a regular corkscrew and a corkscrew-headed demon, and using that similarity to form a magic bond. Only here, the bond was between the magician and a god. If you could find a common trait or experience, you could tap the god's power.

That might explain how I'd blasted open the doors at the Hermitage with the Fist of Horus—a spell I'd never been able to do on my own. Without thinking about it, without needing to combine souls with Horus, I'd tapped into his emotions. We both hated feeling confined. I'd used that simple connection to invoke a spell and break the chains. Now, if I could just figure out how to do stuff like that more reliably, it might save us in the coming battles….

We traveled for miles in the Bedouins' truck. The Nile snaked through green and brown fields to our left. We had nothing to drink but water from an old plastic jug that tasted like Vaseline. The goat meat wasn't sitting well in my stomach. Every once in a while I'd remember the poison that had coursed through my body, and my shoulder would start to ache where the *tjesu heru* had bitten me.

Around six in the evening we got our first lead. An old *fellahin,* a peasant farmer selling dates on the roadside, said he knew the village we were seeking. When he heard the name Makan al-Ramal al-Hamrah he made a protective sign against the Evil Eye, but since Bes was the one asking, the old man told us what he knew.

He said Red Sands was an evil place, very badly cursed. No one ever visited nowadays. But the old man remembered the village from before it had been destroyed. We would find it ten kilometers south, at a bend in the river where the sand turned bright red.

Well, duh, I thought, but I couldn't help being excited.

The Bedouins decided to make camp for the night. They wouldn't be going with us the rest of the

way, but they said they'd be honored if Bes and I borrowed their truck.

A few minutes later, Bes and I were cruising along in the pickup. Bes wore a floppy hat almost as ugly as his Hawaiian shirt. It was pulled so low, I wasn't sure he could see anything, especially since he was barely eye-level with the dashboard.

Every time we hit a bump, Bedouin trinkets jangled on the rearview mirror—a metal disk etched with Arabic calligraphy, a Christmas-tree–shaped pine air freshener, some animal teeth on a leather strap, and a little icon of Elvis Presley for reasons I didn't understand. The truck had no suspension and hardly any padding on the seats. I felt like I was riding a mechanical bull. Even without the jostling, my stomach would've been upset. After months of searching and hoping, I couldn't believe I was so close to finding Zia.

"You look terrible," Bes said.

"Thanks."

"I mean magically speaking. You don't look ready for a fight. Whatever's waiting for us, you understand it isn't going to be friendly?"

Under the brim of his hat, his jaw jutted out like he was bracing for an argument.

"You think this is a mistake," I said. "You think I should've stayed with Sadie."

He shrugged. "I think if you were looking at it straight, you'd see this has *TRAP* written all over it. The old Chief Lector—Iskandar—he wouldn't have hidden your girlfriend—"

"She's not my girlfriend."

"—without putting some protective spells around her. Set and Apophis apparently *both* want you to find this place, which means it *cannot* be good for you. You're leaving your sister and Walt on their own. On top of all that, we're traipsing through Desjardins' backyard, and after that stunt in St. Petersburg, Menshikov won't rest until he finds you. So, yeah, I'd say this isn't your brightest idea."

I stared out the windshield. I wanted to be mad at Bes for calling me stupid, but I was afraid he might be right. I'd been hoping for a happy reunion with Zia. The chances were I'd never make it through tonight alive.

"Maybe Menshikov is still recovering from his head injuries," I said hopefully.

Bes laughed. "Take it from me, kid. Menshikov is already after you. He never forgets an insult."

His voice smoldered with anger, like it did in St. Petersburg when he'd told us about the dwarf wedding. I wondered what had really happened to Bes in that palace, and why he was still brooding over it three hundred years later.

"Was it Vlad?" I asked. "Was he the one who captured you?"

It didn't seem so far-fetched. I'd met several magicians who were centuries old. But Bes shook his head.

"His grandfather, Prince Alexander Menshikov." Bes said the name like it was a major insult. "He was secretly the head of the Eighteenth Nome. Powerful. Cruel. A lot like his grandson. I'd never dealt with a magician like that. It was the first time I'd been captured."

"But didn't the magicians lock all you gods in the Duat after Egypt fell?"

"Most of us," Bes agreed. "Some slept the entire two millennia until your dad unleashed us. Others broke out from time to time and the House of Life would track them down and put them back. Sekhmet broke out in 1918. Big influenza epidemic. But a few of the gods like me stayed in the mortal

world the entire time. Back in the ancient days, I was just, you know, a friendly guy. I scared away spirits. The commoners liked me. So when Egypt fell, the Romans adopted me as one of their gods. Then, in the Middle Ages, the Christians modeled gargoyles after me, to protect their cathedrals and whatnot. They made up legends about gnomes, dwarves, helpful leprechauns—all based on me."

"Helpful leprechauns?"

He scowled. "You don't think I'm helpful? I look good in green tights."

"I didn't need that image."

Bes huffed. "Anyway, the House of Life was never serious about tracking me down. I just kept a low profile and stayed out of trouble. I was never captured until Russia. Probably still be a prisoner there if it wasn't for—" He stopped himself, as if realizing he'd said too much.

He turned off the road. The truck rattled over hard-packed sand and rocks, heading for the river.

"Someone helped you escape?" I guessed. "Bast?"

The dwarf's neck turned bright red. "No…not Bast. She was stuck in the abyss fighting Apophis."

"Then—"

"The point is, I got free, and I got my revenge. I managed to get Alexander Menshikov convicted on corruption charges. He was disgraced, stripped of his wealth and titles. His whole family was shipped off to Siberia. Best day of my life. Unfortunately, his grandson Vladimir made a comeback. Eventually he moved back to St. Petersburg, rebuilt his grandfather's fortune, and took over the Eighteenth Nome. If Vlad had the chance to capture me…"

Bes shifted in the driver's seat like the springs were getting uncomfortable. "I guess why I'm telling you this… You're okay, kid. The way you stood up for your sister on Waterloo Bridge, ready to take me on—that took guts. And trying to ride a *tjesu heru*? That was plenty brave. Stupid, but brave."

"*Um,* thanks."

"You remind me of myself," Bes continued, "back when I was a young dwarf. You got a stubborn streak. When it comes to girl problems, you're clueless."

"Girl problems?" I thought nobody could embarrass me as much as Sadie did when she learned my secret name, but Bes was doing a pretty good job. "This isn't just a girl problem."

Bes regarded me like I was a poor lost puppy. "You want to save Zia. I get that. You want her to like you. But when you rescue somebody…it complicates things. Don't get starry-eyed about somebody you can't have, especially if it blinds you to somebody who's really important. Don't… don't make my mistakes."

I heard the pain in his voice. I knew he was trying to help, but it still felt weird getting guy advice from a four-foot-tall god in an ugly hat.

"The person who rescued you," I said. "It was a goddess, wasn't it? Someone besides Bast—somebody you were involved with?"

His knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. "Kid."

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad we had this talk. Now, if you value your teeth—"

"I'll shut up."

"That's good." Bes put his foot on the brake. "Because I think we're here."

The sun was going down at our backs. Everything in front of us was bathed in red light—the sand, the water of the Nile, the hills on the horizon. Even the fronds of the palm trees looked like they were tinged with blood.

Set would love this place, I thought.

There was no sign of civilization—just a few gray herons flying overhead and an occasional splash in the river: maybe fish or a crocodile. I imagined this part of the Nile hadn't looked too different in the time of the pharaohs.

"Come on," Bes said. "Bring your stuff."

Bes didn't wait for me. When I caught up to him, he was standing on the riverbank, sifting sand through his fingers.

"It's not just the light," I realized. "That stuff is *really* red."

Bes nodded. "You know why?"

My mom would have said iron oxide or something like that. She'd had a scientific explanation for everything. But something told me Bes wasn't looking for that kind of answer.

"Red is the color of evil," I said. "The desert. Chaos. Destruction."

Bes dusted off his hands. "This was a bad place to build a village."

I looked around for any sign of a settlement. The red sand stretched in either direction for about a hundred yards. Thick grass and willow trees bordered the area, but the sand itself was completely barren. The way it glittered and shifted under my feet reminded me of the mounds of dried scarab shells in the Duat, holding back Apophis. I really wished I hadn't thought of that.

"There's nothing here," I said. "No ruins. Nothing."

"Look again." Bes pointed to the river. Old dead reeds stuck up here and there over an area the size of a soccer field. Then I realized the reeds weren't reeds—they were decaying boards and wooden poles, the remains of simple dwellings. I walked to the edge of the water. A few feet out, it was calm and shallow enough that I could make out a line of submerged mud bricks: the foundation of a wall slowly dissolving into silt.

"The whole village sank?"

"It was swallowed," Bes said. "The Nile is trying to wash away the evil that happened here."

I shivered. The fang wounds on my shoulder started throbbing again. "If it's such an evil place, why would Iskandar hide Zia here?"

"Good question," Bes said. "You want to find the answer, you'll have to wade out there."

Part of me wanted to run back to the truck. The last time I'd waded into a river—the Rio Grande in El Paso—it hadn't gone so well. We'd battled the crocodile god Sobek and barely gotten away with our lives. *This* was the Nile. Gods and monsters would be much stronger here.

"You're coming too, aren't you?" I asked Bes.

The corner of his eye twitched. "Running water's not good for gods. Loosens our connection to the Duat…"

He must have seen the look of desperation on my face.

"Yeah, okay," he sighed. "I'm right behind you."

Before I could chicken out, I put one boot in the river and sank up to my ankle.

"Gross." I waded out, my feet making sounds like a cow chewing gum.

A little too late, I realized how poorly prepared I was. I didn't have my sword, because I'd lost it in St. Petersburg. I hadn't been able to summon it back. For all I knew, the Russian magicians had melted it down. I still had my wand, but that was mostly for defensive spells. If I had to go on the offense, I'd be at a serious disadvantage.

I pulled an old stick out of the mud and used it to poke around. Bes and I trudged through the shallows, trying to find anything useful. We kicked over some bricks, discovered a few intact sections of walls, and brought up some pottery shards. I thought about the story Zia had told me—how her dad caused the destruction of the village by unearthing a demon trapped in a jar. For all I knew, these were shards of that same jar.

Nothing attacked us except mosquitoes. We didn't find any traps. But every splash in the river made me think of crocodiles (and not the nice albino kind like Philip back in Brooklyn) or the big toothy tiger fish Zia had shown me once in the First Nome. I imagined them swimming around my feet, trying to decide which leg looked the tastiest.

Out of the corner of my eye I kept seeing ripples and tiny whirlpools like something was following me. When I stabbed the water with my stick, there was nothing there.

After an hour of searching, the sun had almost set. We were supposed to make it back to Alexandria to meet up with Sadie by morning, which left us almost no time to find Zia. And twenty-four hours from now, the next time the sun went down, the equinox would begin.

We kept looking, but didn't find anything more interesting than a muddy deflated soccer ball and a set of dentures. [Yes, Sadie, they were even more disgusting than Gramps's.] I stopped to swat the mosquitoes off my neck. Bes snatched something out of the water—a wriggly fish or a frog—and stuck it in his mouth.

"Do you *have* to?" I asked.

"What?" he said, still chewing. "It's dinnertime."

I turned in disgust and poked my stick in the water.

Thunk.

I struck something harder than mud brick or wood. This was stone.

I traced my stick along the bottom. It wasn't a rock. It was a flat row of hewn blocks. The edge dropped off to another row of stones about a foot lower: like stairs, leading down.

"Bes," I called.

He waded over. The water came up almost to his armpits. His form shimmered in the current like he might disappear any minute.

I showed him what I'd found.

"Huh." He dunked his head underwater. When he came back up, his beard was covered in muck and weeds. "Stairs, all right. Reminds me of the entrance to a tomb."

"A tomb," I said, "in the middle of a village?"

Off to my left, there was another splash.

Bes frowned. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah. Ever since we got into the water. You haven't noticed?"

Bes stuck his finger in the water as if testing the temperature. "We should hurry."

"Why?"

"Probably nothing." He lied even worse than my dad. "Let's get a look at this tomb. Part the river."

He said that as if it were a perfectly normal request, like *Pass the salt.*

"I'm a combat magician," I said. "I don't know how to part a river."

Bes looked offended. "Oh, come on. That's standard stuff. Back in Khufu's day I knew a magician who parted the Nile just so he could climb to the bottom and retrieve a girl's necklace. Then there was that Israelite fellow, Mickey."

"Moses?"

"Yeah, him," Bes said. "Anyway, you should totally be able to part the water. We gotta hurry."

"If it's so easy, why don't you do it?"

"*Now* he gets an attitude. I told you, kid, running water interferes with godly power. Probably one of the reasons Iskandar hid your friend down there, if that's where she is. You can do this. Just—"

He suddenly tensed. "Get to the shore."

"But you said—"

"Now!"

Before we could move, the river erupted around us. Three separate waterspouts blasted upward, and Bes was pulled underwater.

I tried to run, but my feet stuck in the mud. The waterspouts surrounded me. They swirled into human shapes with heads, shoulders, and arms made from ribbons of churning water, as if they were mummies created from the Nile.

Twenty feet downstream, Bes broke to the surface. "Water demons!" he spluttered. "Ward them off!"

"How?" I shouted.

Two of the water demons veered toward Bes. The dwarf god tried to keep his footing, but the river boiled into whitewater rapids, and he was already up to his armpits.

"Come on, kid!" he yelled. "Every shepherd used to know charms against water demons!"

"Well, find me a shepherd, then!"

Bes yelled, "BOO!" and the first water demon evaporated. He turned toward the second, but before he could scare it, the water demon blasted him in the face.

Bes choked and stumbled, water shooting out his nostrils. The demon crashed over him, and Bes went under again.

"Bes!" I yelled.

The third demon surged toward me. I raised my wand and managed a weak shield of blue light. The demon slammed against it, knocking me backward.

Its mouth and eyes spun like miniature whirlpools. Looking in its face was like using a scrying bowl. I could sense the thing's endless hunger, its hatred for humans. It wanted to break every dam,

devour every city, and drown the world in a sea of chaos. And it would start by killing me.

My concentration faltered. The thing rushed me, shattering my shield and pulling me underwater.

Ever get water up your nose? Imagine an entire wave up your nose—an *intelligent* wave that knows exactly how to drown you. I lost my wand. My lungs filled with liquid. All rational thought dissolved into panic.

I thrashed and kicked, knowing I was only in three or four feet of water, but I couldn't get up. I couldn't see anything through the murk. My head broke the surface, and I saw a fuzzy image of Bes getting tossed around atop a waterspout, screaming, "Boo, already! Be more scared!"

Then I went under again, my hands clawing at the mud.

My heart pounded. My vision started to go dark. Even if I could have thought of a spell, I couldn't have spoken it. I wished I had sea god powers, but they weren't exactly Horus's specialty.

I was losing consciousness when something gripped my arm. I punched at it wildly, and my fist connected with a bearded face.

I broke the surface again, gasping for breath. Bes was half-drowning next to me, yelling: "Stupid —*glub, glub*—trying to save your *glub glub*."

The demon pulled me under again, but suddenly my thoughts were clearer. Maybe that last mouthful of oxygen had done the trick. Or maybe punching Bes had snapped me out of my panic.

I remembered Horus had been in a situation like this before. Set had once tried to drown him, pulling him into the Nile.

I latched on to that memory and made it my own.

I reached into the Duat and channeled the power of the war god into my body. Rage filled me. I would not be pinned down. I followed the Path of Horus. I would *not* let a stupid liquid mummy drown me in three feet of water.

My vision turned red. I screamed, expelling the water from my lungs in one huge blast.

WHOOOM! The Nile exploded. I collapsed on a field of mud.

At first I was too tired to do anything but cough. When I managed to stagger to my feet and wipe the silt out of my eyes, I saw that the river had changed its course. It now curved around the ruins of the village. Exposed in the glistening red mud were bricks and boards, trash, old clothes, the fender of a car, and bones that might've been animal or human. A few fish flopped around, wondering where the river had gone. There was no sign of the water demons. About ten feet away, Bes was scowling at me in annoyance. He had a bloody nose and was buried up to his waist in mud.

"Usually when you part a river," he grumbled, "it doesn't involve punching a dwarf. Now, get me out of here!"

I managed to pry him free, which caused a sucking noise so impressive that I wished I had recorded it. [And no, Sadie, I'm not going to try to make it for the microphone.]

"I'm sorry," I stammered. "I didn't mean to—"

He waved aside the apology. "You handled the water demons. That's what matters. Now we gotta see if you can handle *that*."

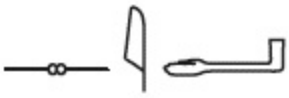
I turned and saw the tomb.

It was a rectangular pit about the size of a walk-in closet, lined with stone blocks. Steps led down to a closed stone door etched with hieroglyphs. The largest was the symbol for the House of

Life:

“Those demons were guarding the entrance,” Bes said. “There may be worse inside.”

Underneath the symbol, I recognized a row of phonetic hieroglyphs:



“Z—I—A,” I read. “Zia’s inside.”

“And that,” Bes muttered, “is what we call in the magic business a *trap*. Last chance to change your mind, kid.”

But I wasn’t really listening. Zia was down there. Even if I’d known what was about to happen, I don’t think I could’ve stopped myself. I climbed down the steps and pushed open the door.

14. At the Tomb of Zia Rashid

THE SARCOPHAGUS was made of water.

It was an oversize human figure with rounded feet, wide shoulders, and a larger-than-life smiling face, like other Egyptian coffins I'd seen; but the whole thing was sculpted from pure glowing liquid. It sat on a stone dais in the middle of a square chamber. Egyptian art decorated the walls, but I didn't pay too much attention to that.

Inside the sarcophagus, Zia Rashid floated in white robes. Her arms were crossed over her chest. In her hands she gripped a shepherd's crook and a war flail, the symbols of a pharaoh. Her staff and wand floated at her side. Her short black hair drifted around her face, which was just as beautiful as I remembered. If you've ever seen the famous sculpture of Queen Nefertiti, Zia reminded me of her, with the raised eyebrows, high cheekbones, graceful nose, and perfect red lips.

[Sadie says I'm overdoing it with the description, but it's true. There's a reason Nefertiti was called the most beautiful woman in the world.]

As I approached the sarcophagus, the water began to shimmer. A current rippled down the sides, tracing the same symbol over and over:

Bes made a rumbling sound in his throat. "You didn't tell me she was a godling."

I hadn't thought to mention it, but of course that's why Iskandar had hidden Zia away. When our dad unleashed the gods at the British Museum, one of them—the river goddess Nephthys—had chosen Zia for a host.

"That's the symbol of Nephthys?" I guessed.

Bes nodded. "Didn't you say this girl was a fire elementalist?"

"Yeah."

"Hmph. Not a good combination. No wonder the Chief Lector put her in suspended animation. A fire magician hosting a water goddess—that could kill her, unless…huh, that's pretty clever."

"What?"

"The combination of water over fire could also mask Zia's powers. If Iskandar was trying to hide her from Apophis…" His eyes widened. "Holy Mother Nut. Is that the crook and flail?"

"Yeah, I think." I wasn't sure why he acted so shocked. "Didn't a lot of important people get

buried with those?"

Bes gave me an incredulous look. "You don't understand, kid. Those are the *original* crook and flail, the royal instruments of Ra."

Suddenly I felt like I'd swallowed a marble. I don't think I could've been more surprised if Bes had said *By the way, you're leaning against a hydrogen bomb.* The crook and flail of Ra were the most powerful symbols of the most powerful Egyptian god. Yet in Zia's hands they didn't appear to be anything special. The crook looked like an oversize gold and blue candy cane. The flail was a wooden rod with three spiked chains at the end. They didn't glow or say PROPERTY OF RA.

"Why would they be here?" I asked.

"Dunno," Bes said, "but that's them. Last I heard they were locked in the First Nome's vaults. Only the Chief Lector had access. I guess Iskandar buried them with your friend here."

"To protect her?"

Bes shrugged, clearly baffled. "That'd be like wiring your home security system to a nuclear missile. Complete overkill. No wonder Apophis hasn't been able to attack her. That's some *serious* protection against Chaos."

"What happens if I wake her?"

"The spells shielding her will be broken. That could be why Apophis led you here. Once Zia's out of that sarcophagus, she's an easier target. As to why Apophis would want her dead, or why Iskandar would go to such trouble to guard her—your guess is as good as mine."

I studied Zia's face. For three months, I'd dreamed of finding her. Now I was almost too scared to wake her. By breaking the sleep spell, I might accidentally hurt her, or leave her open to an attack from Apophis. Even if I succeeded, what if she woke up and decided that she hated me? I wanted to believe she possessed shared memories with her *shabti,* so that she would remember the times we'd had together. But if she hadn't, I wasn't sure I could stand the rejection.

I touched the water coffin.

"Careful, kid," Bes warned.

Magic energy rippled through me. It was subtle—like looking in the face of the water demon—but I could sense Zia's thoughts. She was trapped in a dream of drowning. She was trying to hold on to her last good memory: Iskandar's kindly face as he placed the crook and flail in her hands: *Keep these, my dear. You will need them. And do not fear. Dreams will not bother you.*

But Iskandar had been wrong. Nightmares had invaded her sleep. The voice of Apophis hissed in the darkness: *I destroyed your family. And I am coming for you.* Zia saw the demolition of her village over and over, while Aphophis laughed, and the spirit of Nephthys churned uncomfortably inside her. Iskandar's magic had trapped the goddess too in an enchanted sleep, and she tried to protect Zia, calling on the Nile to cover this chamber and shield them both from the Serpent. Still, she couldn't stop the dreams. Zia had been having the same chaotic nightmare for three months, and her sanity was crumbling.

"I have to free her," I said. "She's partially conscious."

Bes sucked air through his teeth. "That shouldn't be possible, but if it's true—"

"She's in serious trouble." I sank my hand deeper into the sarcophagus. I channeled the same kind of magic I'd used to part the river, only on a smaller scale. Slowly the water lost its shape,

melting like an ice cube. Before Zia could spill off the dais, I caught her in my arms. She dropped the crook and flail. Her staff and wand clattered to the floor.

As the last of the sarcophagus trickled away, Zia's eyes flew open. She tried to breathe but couldn't seem to inhale.

"Bes, what's wrong with her?" I said. "What do I do?"

"The goddess," he said. "Zia's body is rejecting the spirit of Nephthys. Get her to the river!"

Zia's face started to turn blue. I gathered her in my arms and raced up the slippery stairs, which wasn't easy with Zia kicking and hitting me all the way. I managed to make it across the mud without falling and eased her down next to the riverbank.

She clawed at her throat, her eyes full of fear; but as soon as her body touched the Nile, a blue aura flickered around her. Her face turned back to its normal color. Water gushed from her mouth like she'd turned into a human fountain. Looking back on it, I suppose that was pretty gross, but at the time I was too relieved to care.

From the surface of the river rose the watery form of a woman in a blue dress. Most Egyptian gods grew weak in running water, but Nephthys was clearly an exception. She glowed with power. She wore a silver Egyptian crown on her long black hair. Her regal face reminded me of Isis, but this woman had a gentler smile and kinder eyes.

"Hello, Bes." Her voice was soft and rustling, like a breeze through the river grass.

"Nephthys," said the dwarf. "Long time."

The water goddess looked down at Zia, who was shivering in my arms, still gasping for breath.

"I am sorry for using her as a host," Nephthys said. "It was a poor choice, which almost destroyed us both. Guard her well, Carter Kane. She has a good heart, and an important destiny."

"What destiny?" I asked. "How do I protect her?"

Instead of answering, the spirit of Nephthys melted into the Nile.

Bes grunted with approval. "The Nile's where she should be. That's her proper body."

Zia sputtered and doubled over.

"She still can't breathe!" I did the only thing I could think of. I tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Yes, okay, I know how that sounds, but I wasn't thinking straight.

[Stop laughing, Sadie.]

Honestly, I wasn't trying to take advantage. I was just trying to help.

Zia didn't see it that way. She punched me in the chest so hard, I made a sound like a squeaky toy. Then she turned to one side and retched.

I didn't think my breath was *that* bad.

When she focused on me again, her eyes blazed with anger —just like old times.

"Don't you *dare* kiss me!" she managed.

"I wasn't—I didn't—"

"Where's Iskandar?" she demanded. "I thought…" Her eyes lost their focus. "I had a dream that…" She started to tremble. "Eternal Egypt, he's not… He *can't* be—"

"Zia—" I tried to put my hand on her shoulder, but she pushed me away. She turned toward the river and began to sob, her fingers clawing the mud.

I wanted to help her. I couldn't stand to see her in pain. But I looked at Bes, and he tapped his bloody nose, as if warning me: *Go slow, or she'll give you one of these.*

"Zia, we've got a lot to talk about," I said, trying not to sound heartbroken. "Let's get you away from the river."

She sat on the steps of her own tomb and hugged her arms. Her clothes and hair were starting to dry, but in spite of the warm night and the dry wind from the desert, she still trembled.

At my request, Bes brought up her staff and wand from the tomb, along with the crook and flail, but he didn't look happy about it. He handled the items as if they were toxic.

I tried to explain things to Zia: about the *shabti,* Iskandar's death, Desjardins' becoming the Chief Lector, and what had transpired in the last three months since the battle with Set, but I'm not sure how much she heard. She kept shaking her head, pressing her hands over her ears.

"Iskandar can't be dead." Her voice quavered. "He wouldn't have…he wouldn't have done this to me."

"He was trying to protect you," I said. "He didn't know you'd have nightmares. I've been looking for you—"

"Why?" she demanded. "What do you want from me? I remember you from London, but after that —"

"I met your *shabti* in New York. She—you—took Sadie and me to the First Nome. You started our training. We worked together in New Mexico, then at the Red Pyramid—"

"No." She shut her eyes tight. "No, that wasn't me."

"But you can remember what the *shabti* did. Just try—"

"You're a Kane!" she cried. "You're all outlaws. And you're here with—with *that."* She gestured at Bes.

"That has a name," Bes grumbled. "I'm starting to wonder why I drove halfway across Egypt to wake you."

"You're a god!" Zia said. Then she turned to me. "And if *you* summoned him, you'll be put to death!"

"Listen, girl," Bes said. "You were hosting the spirit of Nephthys. So if anyone gets put to death —"

Zia snatched up her staff. "Be gone!"

Fortunately, she wasn't back to full strength. She managed to shoot a weak column of fire at Bes's face, but the dwarf god easily swatted the flames aside.

I grabbed the end of her staff. "Zia, stop! He's not the enemy."

"Can I punch her?" Bes asked. "You punched me, kid. Seems only fair."

"No punching," I said. "No blasting with flames. Zia, we're on the same side. The equinox starts tomorrow at sunset, and Apophis will break out of his prison. He means to destroy you. We're here to rescue you."

The name *Apophis* hit her hard. She struggled to breathe, as if her lungs were filling with water again. "No. No, it isn't possible. Why should I believe you?"

"Because…" I hesitated. What could I say? Because we'd fallen for each other three months ago? Because we've been through so much together and saved each other's lives? Those memories weren't hers. She remembered me—sort of. But our time together was like a movie she'd watched, with an actress playing her role, doing things she never would've done.

"You don't know me," she said bitterly. "Now, go, before I'm forced to fight you. I'll make my own way back to the First Nome."

"Maybe she's right, kid," Bes said. "We should leave. We've worked enough magic here to send up all kinds of alarm bells."

I clenched my fists. My worst fears had come true. Zia didn't like me. Everything we'd shared had crumbled with her ceramic replica. But as I may have mentioned, I get stubborn when I'm told I can't do something.

"I'm not leaving you." I gestured at the ruins of her village. "Zia, this place was destroyed by Apophis. It wasn't an accident. It wasn't your dad's fault. The Serpent was targeting *you.* Iskandar raised you because he sensed you had an important destiny. He hid you with the pharaoh's crook and flail for the same reason—not just because you were hosting a goddess, but because he was dying and he was afraid he wouldn't be able to protect you anymore. I don't know what your destiny is, exactly, but—"

"Stop!" She reignited the tip of her staff. It blazed more brightly this time. "You're twisting my thoughts. You're just like the nightmares."

"You know I'm not." I probably should've shut up, but I couldn't believe Zia would actually incinerate me. "Before he died, Iskandar realized the old ways had to be brought back. That's why he let Sadie and me live. Gods and the magicians have to work together. You—your *shabti* realized that, when we fought together at the Red Pyramid."

"Kid," Bes said more urgently. "We really should go."

"Come with us," I told Zia. "I know you've always felt alone. You never had anyone but Iskandar. I get that, but I'm your friend. We can protect you."

"No one *protects* me!" She shot to her feet. "I am a scribe in the House of Life!"

Flames shot from her staff. I grabbed for my wand, but of course I'd lost it in the river. Instinctively my hands closed around the symbols of the pharaoh—the shepherd's crook and the war flail. I held them up in a defensive X, and Zia's staff shattered instantly. The fire dissipated.

Zia stumbled backward, smoke curling from her hands.

She stared at me in absolute shock. "You dare to use the symbols of Ra?"

I probably looked just as surprised. "I—I didn't mean to! I just want to talk. You've got to be hungry. We've got food and water back at the pickup truck—"

"Carter!" Bes tensed. "Something's wrong…"

He turned too late. A blinding white light exploded around him. When the spots cleared from my eyes, Bes was frozen in a cage of bars glowing like fluorescent tubes. Standing next to him were the two people I least wanted to see:

Michel Desjardins and Vlad the Inhaler.

Desjardins looked even older than he had in my vision. His graying hair and forked beard were long and unkempt. His cream-colored robes hung loosely on him. The leopard-skin cloak of the Chief Lector was slipping off his left shoulder.

Vlad Menshikov, on the other hand, looked well rested and ready for a good game of Torture-the-Kane. He wore a fresh white linen suit and carried a new serpent staff. His silver snake necklace glinted against his tie. On his curly gray hair sat a white fedora, probably to cover the head injuries Set had given him. He smiled as if he were delighted to see me, which might've been convincing—except he didn't have his sunglasses anymore. Through the wreckage of scar tissue and red welts, those horrible eyes gleamed with hatred.

"As I told you, Chief Lector," Menshikov rasped, "Kane's next move would be to find this poor girl and attempt to turn her."

"Desjardins, listen," I said. "Menshikov's a traitor. He summoned Set. He's trying to free Apophis—"

"You see?" Menshikov cried. "As I predicted, the boy tries to blame his illegal magic on me."

"What?" I said. "No!"

The Russian turned to examine Bes, who was still frozen in his glowing cage. "Carter Kane, you claim to be innocent, and yet we find you here consorting with gods. Who have we here? Bes the dwarf! Fortunately, my grandfather taught me an excellent binding spell for this particular creature. Grandfather also taught me many spells of torment which were…quite effective on the dwarf god. I've always wanted to try them."

Desjardins wrinkled his nose in distaste, but I couldn't tell whether it was because of me or of Menshikov.

"Carter Kane," said the Chief Lector, "I knew you desired the pharaoh's throne. I knew you were scheming with Horus. But now I find you holding the crook and flail of Ra, which were recently discovered to be missing from our vaults. Even for you, this is a brazen act of aggression."

I looked down at the weapons in my hands. "It's not like that. I just found them…"

I stopped. I couldn't tell him the symbols had been buried with Zia. Even if he believed me, it might get Zia in trouble.

Desjardins nodded as if I'd confessed. To my surprise, he looked a little sad about it. "As I thought. Amos assured me you were an honorable servant of Ma'at. Instead, I find you are both a godling and thief."

"Zia." I turned toward her. "You've got to listen. You're in danger. Menshikov is working for Apophis. He'll kill you."

Menshikov did a good job of looking offended. "Why would I wish to harm her? I sense she is free of Nephthys now. It's not her fault the goddess invaded her form." He held out his hand to Zia. "I am glad to see you safe, child. You are not to blame for Iskandar's odd decisions in his final days—hiding you here, softening his attitude toward these Kane criminals. Come away from the traitor. Come home with us."

Zia hesitated. "I had…I had strange dreams…."

"You are confused," Desjardins said gently. "This is natural. Your *shabti* was relaying its memories to you. You *saw* Carter Kane and his sister make a pact with Set at the Red Pyramid. Rather than destroy the Red Lord, they let him go. Do you remember?"

Zia studied me warily.

"Remember why we did it," I pleaded. "Chaos is rising. Apophis will break free in less than twenty-four hours. Zia…I…"

The words stuck in my throat. I wanted to tell her how I felt about her, but her eyes hardened like amber.

"I don't know you," she murmured. "I'm sorry."

Menshikov smiled. "Of course you don't, child. You have no business with traitors. Now, with Lord Desjardins' permission, we will bring this young heretic back to the First Nome, where he will be given a fair trial"—Menshikov turned toward me, his ruined eyes burning with triumph—"and then, executed."

SADIE

15. Camels Are Evil…

YES, CARTER, THE WHOLE BUSINESS with the water demons must've been horrible. But I feel *no* sympathy for you, as 1) you brought that trip entirely on yourself, and 2) while you were rescuing Zia, *I* was dealing with camels.

Camels are disgusting.

You may think *But, Sadie, these were magical camels, summoned by one of Walt's amulets. Clever Walt! Surely magic camels are not as bad as normal camels.*

I can now attest that magic camels spit like, poo like, drool like, bite like, eat like, and, most disgustingly, smell like normal camels. If anything, their disgustingness is magically enhanced.

We didn't start with the camels, of course. We worked our way up to them in a series of progressively more horrible modes of transportation. First we took a bus to a small town west of Alexandria—a bus without air conditioning, packed with men who had not discovered the benefits of underarm deodorant. Then we hired a driver to take us to Bahariya—a driver who first had the nerve to play ABBA's greatest hits and eat raw onions, then drove us to the middle of nowhere and—surprise!—introduced us to his friends, the bandits, who were keen to rob defenseless American teenagers. I was delighted to show them how my staff turned into a large hungry lion. As far as I know, the bandits and driver are still running. However, the car had stopped, and no amount of magic would revive the engine.

At that point, we decided it was best to stay off the grid. I could deal with dirty looks from the locals. I could deal with attracting attention as an oddity—an American/British girl with purple-streaked hair, traveling alone with a boy who did not look like her brother. In fact, that fairly well described my life. But after the highway robbery incident, Walt and I realized just *how* much the locals were watching us, marking us as a target. I had no desire to be singled out by more bandits, or Egyptian police, or, even worse, any magicians who might be lurking undercover. So we summoned the magic camels, charmed a handful of sand to point the way to Bahariya, and set out across the desert.

How was the desert, Sadie? You might wonder.

Thanks for asking. It was hot.

And another thing: Why do deserts have to be so bloody huge? Why can't they be a few hundred meters wide, just enough to give you the idea of sandy, dry, and miserable, then yield to some proper landscape, like a meadow with a river, or a high street with shops?

No such luck for us. The desert went on forever. I could imagine Set, the god of the wastelands,

laughing at us as we trudged over endless dunes. If this was his home, I didn't think much of the way he'd decorated.

I named my camel Katrina. She was a natural disaster. She slobbered everywhere and seemed to think the purple streak in my hair was some kind of exotic fruit. She was obsessed with trying to eat my head. I named Walt's camel Hindenburg. He was almost as large as a zeppelin and definitely as full of gas.

As we rode side by side, Walt seemed lost in thought, peering at the horizon. He'd rushed to my aid in Alexandria without hesitation. As I'd suspected, our *shen* amulets were connected. With a little concentration, I'd been able to send him a mental message about our predicament. With a bit more effort, I'd been able to literally pull him through the Duat to my side. Quite a handy magic item: instant hot guy.

Once here, though, he'd grown increasingly quiet and uncomfortable. He was dressed like a normal American teen on an outdoor excursion—a black workout top that fit him quite well, hiking pants, and boots. But if you looked more closely, you could tell he'd come equipped with every magic item he'd ever made. Around his neck hung a veritable zoo of animal amulets. Three rings glinted on each hand. Around his waist was a corded belt I'd never seen before, so I assumed it had magic powers. He also carried a backpack, no doubt stuffed with more handy bits and bobs. Despite this personal arsenal, Walt seemed awfully nervous.

"Lovely weather," I prompted.

He frowned, coming out of his daze. "Sorry. I was…thinking."

"You know, sometimes talking helps. For instance, oh, I don't know. If I had a major problem, something life-threatening, and I'd only confided to *Jaz*...and if Bes knew what was going on, but wasn't telling…and if I'd agreed to come on an adventure with a good friend, and had hours to chat as we crossed the desert, I might be tempted to tell her what was wrong."

"Hypothetically," he said.

"Yes. And if this girl were the last person on earth to know what was wrong with me, and really *cared*…well, I can imagine she'd get quite frustrated at being kept in the dark. And she might hypothetically strangle you—I mean me. Hypothetically."

Walt managed a faint smile. Though I can't say his eyes melted me like Anubis's, he did have a gorgeous face. He looked nothing like my father, but he had the same sort of strength and rugged handsomeness—a kind of gentle gravity that made me feel safer, and a bit more firmly planted on the earth.

"It's hard for me to talk about," he said. "I didn't mean to hide anything from you."

"Fortunately, it's not too late."

Our camels plodded along. Katrina tried to kiss, or possibly spit on Hindenburg, and Hindenburg farted in response. I found this a depressing commentary on boy-girl relationships.

At last Walt said, "It has to do with the blood of the pharaohs. You guys—I mean the Kanes—you combine two powerful royal lines, Narmer and Ramesses the Great, right?"

"So I've been told. Sadie the Great does have a nice ring to it."

Walt didn't respond to that. Perhaps he was imagining me as a pharaoh, which I'll admit is a rather frightening concept.

"My royal line…" He hesitated. "How much do you know about Akhenaton?"

"Off the top of my head, I'd say he was a pharaoh. Probably of Egypt."

Walt laughed, which was good. If I could keep his mood from getting too serious, it might be easier for him to open up.

"Top of the class," he said. "Akhenaton was the pharaoh who decided to do away with all the old gods and just worship Aten, the sun."

"Oh…right." The story vaguely rang a bell, which alarmed me, as it made me feel like almost as much of an Egyptian geek as Carter. "He's the chap who moved the capital, eh?"

Walt nodded. "He built an entirely new city at Amarna. He was kind of a weird dude, but he was the first one who had the idea that the old gods were bad. He tried to ban their worship, shut down their temples. He wanted to worship only one god, but he made a strange choice for the one god. He thought it was the sun. Not the sun god Ra—the *actual* sun disk, Aten. Anyway, the old priests and magicians, especially the priests of Amun-Ra—"

"Another name for Ra?" I guessed.

"More or less," Walt said. "So the priests of Amun-Ra's temple weren't too happy with Akhenaton. After he died, they defaced his statues, tried to wipe out his name from all the monuments and stuff. Amarna was completely abandoned. Egypt went back to the old ways."

I let that sink in. Thousands of years before Iskandar had issued a rule exiling the gods, a pharaoh had had the same idea.

"And this was your great-great-whatever grandfather?" I asked.

Walt wrapped the camel's reins around his wrist. "I'm one of Akhenaton's descendants. Yeah. We've got the same aptitude for magic as most royal lines, but…we've got problems, too. The gods weren't happy with Akhenaton, as you can imagine. His son Tutankhamen—"

"King Tut?" I asked. "You're related to King Tut?"

"Unfortunately," Walt said. "Tutankhamen was the first to suffer the curse. He died at nineteen. And he was one of the luckier ones."

"Hang on. What curse?"

That's when Katrina came to a screeching halt. You may protest that camels can't screech, but you're quite wrong. As she reached the top of a massive sand dune, Katrina made a wet screechy sound much worse than a car's brakes. Hindenburg came to more of a farting halt.

I looked down the other side of the dune. Below us, in the middle of the desert, a hazy valley of green fields and palm trees sprawled out, roughly the size of central London. Birds flew overhead. Small lakes sparkled in the afternoon sun. Smoke rose from cooking fires at a few dwellings dotted here and there. After so long in the desert, my eyes hurt from looking at all the colors, like when you come out of a dark cinema into a bright afternoon.

I understood how ancient travelers must've felt, discovering an oasis like this after days in the wilderness. It was the closest thing I'd ever seen to the Garden of Eden.

The camels hadn't stopped to admire the beautiful scenery, though. A trail of tiny footprints wound through the sand, all the way from the edge of the oasis to our dune. And coming up the hill was a very disgruntled-looking cat.

"It's about time," said the cat.

I slid off Katrina's back and stared at the cat in amazement. Not because it spoke—I'd seen stranger things—but because I recognized the voice.

"Bast?" I said. "What are you doing inside that—what *is* that, exactly?"

The cat stood on its hind legs and spread its front paws like: *Voilà!* "An Egyptian mau, of course. Beautiful leopard spots, bluish fur—"

"It looks like it's been through a blender!"

I wasn't just being harsh. The cat was terribly beaten up. Large chunks of its fur were missing. It might once have been beautiful, but I was more inclined to think it had always been feral. Its remaining fur was dirty and matted, and its eyes were swollen and scarred almost as badly as Vlad Menshikov's.

Bast—or the cat—or *whatever* was in charge—dropped back on all fours and sniffed indignantly. "Sadie, dear, I believe we've talked about battle scars on cats. This old tom is a warrior!"

A warrior who loses, I thought, but I decided not to say that.

Walt slid off Hindenburg's back. "Bast, how—where are you?"

"Still deep in the Duat." She sighed. "It'll be another day at least before I can find my way out. Things down here are a bit…chaotic."

"Are you all right?" I asked.

The cat nodded. "I just have to be careful. The abyss is teeming with enemies. All the regular paths and river ways are guarded. I'll have to take a long detour to get back safely, and since the equinox starts tomorrow at sunset, the timing is going to be tight. I thought I'd better send you a message."

"So…" Walt knit his eyebrows. "That cat isn't real?"

"Of course it's real," Bast said. "Just controlled by a sliver of my *ba.* I can speak through cats easily, you know, at least for a few minutes at a time, but this is the first time you've been close to one. Did you realize that? Unbelievable! You really need to hang around more cats. By the way, this mau will need a reward when I'm gone. Some nice fish, perhaps, or some milk—"

"Bast," I interrupted. "You said you had a message?"

"Right. Apophis is waking."

"We knew that!"

"But it's worse than we thought," she said. "He's got a legion of demons working on his cage, and he's timing his release to coincide with your waking Ra. In fact, he's *counting* on your freeing Ra. It's part of his plan."

My head felt like it was turning to jelly, though that may have been because Katrina the camel was sucking on my hair. "Apophis *wants* us to free his archenemy? That makes no sense."

"I can't explain it," Bast said, "but as I got closer to his cage, I could glean his thoughts. I suppose because we fought so many centuries we have some sort of connection. At any rate, the equinox begins tomorrow at sunset, as I said. The following dawn, the morning of March twenty-first, Apophis intends to rise from the Duat. He plans to swallow the sun and destroy the world. And he believes your plan to awaken Ra will help him do that."

Walt frowned. “If Apophis wants us to succeed, why is he trying so hard to stop us?”

“Is he?” I asked.

A dozen small things that had bothered me over the past few days suddenly clicked together: why had Apophis only *scared* Carter in the Brooklyn Museum, when the Arrows of Sekhmet could have destroyed him? How had we escaped so easily from St. Petersburg? Why had Set volunteered the location of the third scroll?

“Apophis wants chaos,” I said. “He wants to divide his enemies. If Ra comes back, it could throw us into a civil war. The magicians are already divided. The gods would be fighting each other. There would be no clear ruler. And if Ra isn’t reborn in a strong new form—if he’s as old and feeble as I saw in my vision—”

“So we *shouldn’t* awaken Ra?” Walt asked.

“That’s not the answer either,” I said.

Bast tilted her head. “I’m confused.”

My mind was racing. Katrina the camel was still chewing on my hair, turning it into a slimy mess, but I hardly noticed. “We *have* to stick to the plan. We need Ra. Ma’at and Chaos have to balance, right? If Apophis rises, Ra has to as well.”

Walt twisted his rings. “But if Apophis *wants* Ra awakened, if he thinks it will help him destroy the world—”

“We have to believe Apophis is wrong.” I remembered something Jaz’s *ren* had told me: *We choose to believe in Ma’at.*

“Apophis can’t imagine that anyone could unite the gods and magicians,” I said. “He thinks the return of Ra will weaken us even further. We have to prove him wrong. We have to make order from chaos. That’s what Egypt has always done. It’s a risk—a *huge* risk—but if we do nothing because we fear we’ll fail, we play right into Apophis’s hands.”

It’s hard to give a rousing speech with a camel licking your head, but Walt nodded. The cat didn’t look quite so enthusiastic. Then again, cats rarely do.

“Don’t underestimate Apophis,” Bast said. “You haven’t fought him. I have.”

“Which is why we need you back quickly.” I told her about Vlad Menshikov’s conversation with Set, and his plans to destroy Brooklyn House. “Bast, our friends are in terrible danger. Menshikov is possibly even more insane than Amos realizes. As soon as you’re able, go to Brooklyn. I have a feeling our last stand is going to be there. We’ll get the third scroll and find Ra.”

“I don’t like last stands,” the cat said. “But you’re right. It sounds bad. By the way, where are Bes and Carter?” She looked suspiciously at the camels. “You didn’t turn them into those, did you?”

“The idea is appealing,” I said. “But, no.”

I told her briefly what Carter was up to.

Bast hissed with distaste. “A foolish detour! I’ll have words with that dwarf about letting you go off on your own.”

“What am I, invisible?” Walt protested.

“Sorry, dear, I didn’t mean—” The cat’s eyes twitched. It coughed like it had a hairball. “My connection is failing. Good luck, Sadie. The best entrance to the tombs is on a small date farm just to the southeast. Look for a black water tower. And do watch out for the Romans. They’re quite—”

The cat puffed up its tail. Then it blinked and looked around in confusion.

"What Romans?" I asked. "They're quite what?"

"Mrow." The cat stared at me with an expression that said: *Who are you and where is the food?*

I swatted the camel's nose away from my slimy hair. "Come on, Walt," I grumbled. "Let's go find some mummies."

We provided the cat with bits of beef jerky and some water from our supplies. It wasn't as good as fish and milk, but the cat seemed happy enough. As it was in sight of the oasis and obviously knew its way around better than we did, we left it to finish its meal. Walt turned the camels back into amulets, thank goodness, and we trudged into Bahariya on foot.

The date farm wasn't difficult to find. The black water tower sat at the edge of the property, and it was the tallest structure in sight. We made our way toward it, weaving through acres of palm trees, which provided some shade from the sun. An adobe farmhouse stood in the distance, but we didn't see any people. Probably the Egyptians knew better than to be out in the afternoon heat.

When we reached the water tower, I didn't see any obvious tomb entrance. The tower looked quite old—four rusty steel posts holding a round tank the size of a garage about fifteen meters in the air. The tank had a slow leak. Every few seconds water dropped from the sky and smacked against the hard-packed sand underneath. There wasn't much else in sight except for more palm trees, a few tarnished farm tools, and a weathered plywood sign lying on the ground. The sign was spray-painted in Arabic and English, probably from some attempt by the farmer to sell his wares in the market. The English read: *Dates—best price. Cold Bebsi.*

"Bebsi?" I asked.

"Pepsi," Walt said. "I read about that on the Internet. There's no 'p' in Arabic. Everyone here calls soda Bebsi."

"So you have to have Bebsi with your bizza?"

"Brobably."

I snorted. "If this is a famous dig site, shouldn't there be more activity? Archaeologists? Ticket booths? Souvenir merchants?"

"Maybe Bast sent us to a secret entrance," Walt said. "Better than sneaking past a bunch of guards and caretakers."

A secret entrance sounded quite intriguing, but unless the water tower was a magic teleporter, or one of the date trees had a concealed door, I wasn't sure where this oh-so-helpful entrance might be. I kicked the Bebsi sign. There was nothing underneath except more sand, slowly turning to mud from the drip, drip, drip of the leaky tower.

Then I looked more closely at the wet spot on the ground.

"Hang on." I knelt. The water was pooling in a little canal, as if the sand were seeping into a subterranean crack. The crevice was about a meter long and no wider than a pencil, but much too straight to be natural. I dug in the sand. Six centimeters down, my fingernails scraped stone.

"Help me clear this," I told Walt.

A minute later we'd uncovered a flat paving stone about one meter square. I tried to work my fingers under the wet edges, but the stone was too thick and much too heavy to lift.

"We can use something as a lever," Walt suggested. "Pry it up."

"Or," I said, "stand back."

Walt looked ready to protest, but when I brought out my staff, he knew enough to get out of the way. With my new understanding of godly magic, I didn't so much *think* about what I needed as *feel* a connection to Isis. I remembered a time when she'd found her husband's coffin grown into the trunk of a cypress tree, and in her anger and desperation she blew the tree apart. I channeled those emotions and pointed at the stone. *"Ha-di!"*

Good news: the spell worked even better than in St. Petersburg. The hieroglyph glowed at the end of my staff, and the stone was blasted to rubble, revealing a dark hole underneath.

Bad news: that's not all I destroyed. Around the hole, the ground began to crumble. Walt and I scrambled backward as more stones fell into the pit, and I realized I'd just destabilized the entire roof of a subterranean room. The hole widened until it reached the support legs of the water tower. The water tower began to creak and sway.

"Run!" Walt yelled.

We didn't stop until we were hiding behind a palm tree thirty meters away. The water tower sprang a hundred different leaks, wobbled back and forth like a drunken man, then fell toward us and shattered, soaking us from head to toe and sending a flood through the rows of palm trees.

The noise was so deafening, it must've been heard throughout the oasis.

"Oops," I said.

Walt looked at me like I was mad. I suppose I was guilty as charged. But it's just so bloody tempting to blow things up, isn't it?

We ran to the Sadie Kane Memorial Crater. It was now the size of a swimming pool. Five meters down, under a pile of sand and rocks, were rows of mummies, all wrapped in old cloth and laid out on stone slabs. The mummies were now flattened, I'm afraid, but I could tell they'd been brightly painted with red, blue, and gold.

"Golden mummies." Walt looked horrified. "Part of the tomb system that hasn't been excavated yet. You just ruined—"

"I *did* say *Oops*. Now, help me down there, before the owner of this water tower shows up with a shotgun."

SADIE

16. …But Not as Evil as Romans

TO BE FAIR, THE MUMMIES in that particular room were mostly ruined already, thanks to the moisture from the leaking tower above. Just add water to mummies for a truly horrible smell.

We climbed over the rubble and found a corridor leading deeper underground. I couldn't tell whether it was natural or man-made, but it snaked a good forty meters through solid rock before opening into another burial chamber. This room had not been damaged by water. Everything was remarkably well preserved. Walt had brought torches [flashlights, for you Americans], and in the dim light, on stone slabs and in niches carved along the walls, gold-painted mummies glittered. There were at least a hundred in this room alone, and more corridors led off in each direction.

Walt shined his light on three mummies lying together on a central dais. Their bodies were completely wrapped in linen, so they looked rather like bowling pins. Their likenesses were painted on the linen in meticulous detail—hands crossed over their chests, jewelry adorning their necks, Egyptian kilt and sandals, and a host of protective hieroglyphs and images of the gods in a border on each side. All this was typical Egyptian art, but their faces were done in a completely different style—realistic portraits that looked cut-and-pasted onto the mummies' heads. On the left was a man with a thin, bearded face and sad dark eyes. On the right was a beautiful woman with curly auburn hair. What really pulled at my heart, though, was the mummy in the middle. Its body was tiny—obviously a child. Its portrait showed a boy of about seven years old. He had the man's eyes and the woman's hair.

"A family," Walt guessed. "Buried together."

There was something tucked under the child's right elbow —a small wooden horse, possibly his favorite toy. Even though this family had been dead for thousands of years, I couldn't help getting a bit teary-eyed. It was so bloody sad.

"How did they die?" I wondered.

From the corridor directly in front of us, a voice echoed, "The wasting disease."

My staff was instantly in my hand. Walt trained his torch on the doorway, and a ghost stepped into the room. At least I assumed he was a ghost, because he was see-through. He was a heavy older man with short-cropped white hair, bulldog jowls, and a cross expression. He wore Roman-style robes and kohl eyeliner, so he looked rather like Winston Churchill—if the old prime minister had thrown a wild toga party and gotten his face painted.

"Newly dead?" He eyed us warily. "Haven't seen any new arrivals in a long time. Where are your bodies?"

Walt and I glanced at each other.

"Actually," I said, "we're wearing them."

The ghost's eyebrows shot up. "*Di immortales!* You're alive?"

"So far," Walt said.

"Then you've brought offerings?" The man rubbed his hands. "Oh, they *said* you would come, but we've waited ages! Where have you been?"

"Um..." I didn't want to disappoint a ghost, especially as he was beginning to glow more brightly, which in magic is often a prelude to exploding. "Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. I'm Sadie Kane. This is Walt—"

"Of course! You need my name for the spells." The ghost cleared his throat. "I am Appius Claudius Iratus."

I got the feeling I was supposed to be impressed. "Right. That's not Egyptian, I gather?"

The ghost looked offended. "Roman, of course. Following those cursed Egyptian customs is how we all ended up here to begin with! Bad enough I got stationed in this god-forsaken oasis—as if Rome needs an entire legion to guard some date farms! Then I had the bad luck to fall ill. Told my wife on my deathbed: 'Lobelia, an old-fashioned Roman burial. None of this local nonsense.' But no! She never listened. *Had* to mummify me, so my *ba* is stuck here forever. Women! She probably moved back to Rome and died in the proper way."

"Lobelia?" I asked, because really I hadn't heard much after that. What sort of parents name their child Lobelia?

The ghost huffed and crossed his arms. "But you don't want to hear me ramble on, do you? You may call me Mad Claude. That's the translation in your tongue."

I wondered how a Roman ghost could speak English—or if I simply understood him through some sort of telepathy. Either way, I was not relieved to find out his name was Mad Claude.

"Um..." Walt raised his hand. "Are you mad as in angry? Or mad as in crazy?"

"Yes," Claude said. "Now, about those offerings. I see staffs, wands, and amulets, so I assume you're priests with the local House of Life? Good, good. Then you'll know what to do."

"What to do!" I agreed heartily. "Yes, quite!"

Claude's eyes narrowed. "Oh, Jupiter. You're novices, aren't you? Did the temple even *explain* the problem to you?"

"Um—"

He stormed over to the family of mummies we'd been looking at. "This is Lucius, Flavia, and little Purpens. They died of the wasting plague. I've been here so long, I could tell you practically *everyone's* story!"

"They talk to you?" I stepped away from the mummy family. Suddenly little Purpens didn't seem so cute.

Mad Claude waved his hand impatiently. "Sometimes, yes. Not as much as in the old days. Their spirits sleep most of the time, now. The point is, no matter how bad a death these people had, their fate *after* death has been worse! All of us —all these Romans living in Egypt—got an Egyptian burial. Local customs, local priests, mummify the bodies for the next life, et cetera. We thought we were covering our bases—two religions, twice the insurance. Problem was, you foolish Egyptian

priests didn't know what you were doing anymore! By the time we Romans came along, most of your magic knowledge was lost. But did you tell us that? No! You were happy to take our coins and do a shoddy job."

"Ah." I backed away a bit more from Mad Claude, who was now glowing quite dangerously. "Well, I'm sure the House of Life has a customer service number for that—"

"You can't go halfway with these Egyptian rituals," he grumbled. "We ended up with mummified bodies and eternal souls tethered to them, and no one followed up! No one said the prayers to help us move to the next life. No one made offerings to nourish our *ba*s. Do you know how hungry I am?"

"We've got some beef jerky," Walt offered.

"We couldn't go to Pluto's realm like good Romans," Mad Claude went on, "because our bodies had been prepared for a different afterlife. We couldn't go to the Duat, because we weren't given the proper Egyptian rituals. Our souls were stuck here, attached to these bodies. Do you have any idea how *boring* it is down here?"

"So, if you're a *ba,"* I asked, "why don't you have a bird's body?"

"I told you! We're all mixed up, not pure Roman ghost, not proper *ba.* If I had wings, believe me, I'd fly out of here! By the way, what year is it? Who's the emperor now?"

"Oh, his name is—" Walt coughed, then rushed on: "You know, Claude, I'm sure we can help you."

"We can?" I said. "Oh, right! We can!"

Walt nodded encouragingly. "The thing is, we have to find something first."

"A scroll," I put in. "Part of the Book of Ra."

Claude scratched his considerable jowls. "And this will help you send our souls to the next life?"

"Well…" I said.

"Yes," Walt said.

"Possibly," I said. "We don't really know until we find it. It's supposed to wake Ra, you see, which will help the Egyptian gods. I'd think that would improve your chances at getting into the afterlife. Besides, I'm on good terms with the Egyptian gods. They pop over for tea from time to time. If you helped us, I could put in a word."

Honestly, I'd just been making up things to say. I'm sure this will surprise you, but I sometimes ramble when I get nervous.

[Oh, stop laughing, Carter.]

At any rate, Mad Claude's expression became shrewder. He studied us as if assessing our bank accounts. I wondered if the Roman Empire had used chariot salesmen, and if Mad Claude had been one. I imagined him on a Roman commercial in a cheap plaid toga: *I must be crazy to be giving away chariots at these prices!*

"On good terms with the Egyptian gods," he mused. "Put in a word, you say."

Then he turned to Walt. Claude's expression was so calculating, so *eager,* it made my skin crawl. "If the scroll you seek is ancient, it would be in the oldest section of the catacombs. Some natives were buried there, you know, long before we Romans came along. Their *bas* have all moved on now. No trouble getting into the Duat for *them.* But their burial sites are still intact, lots of relics

and so on."

"You'd be willing to show us?" Walt asked, with much more excitement than I could've managed.

"Oh, yes." Mad Claude gave us his best "used chariot salesman" smile. "And later, we'll talk about an appropriate fee, eh? Come along, my friends. It's not far."

Note to self: When a ghost offers to guide you deeper into a burial site and his name includes the word *Mad,* it's best to say no.

As we passed through tunnels and chambers, Mad Claude gave us a running commentary on the various mummies. Caligula the date merchant: "Horrible name! But once you're named for an emperor, even a psychotic one, you can't do much about it. He died betting someone he could kiss a scorpion." Varens the slaver: "Disgusting man. Tried to go into the gladiator business. If you give a slave a sword, well…you can guess how he died!" Octavia the legion commander's wife: "Went completely native! Had her cat mummified. She even believed she had the blood of the pharaohs and tried to channel the spirit of Isis. Her death, needless to say, was painful."

He grinned at me like this was extremely funny. I tried not to look horrified.

What struck me most was the sheer number and variety of the mummies. Some were wrapped in real gold. Their portraits were so lifelike, their eyes seemed to follow me as we passed. They sat on ornately carved marble slabs surrounded by valuables: jewelry, vases, even some *shabti.* Other mummies looked as if nursery school children had made them in art class. They were crudely wrapped, painted with shaky hieroglyphs and little stick-figure gods. Their portraits were not much better than I could've done—which is to say, dreadful. Their bodies were stuffed three-deep in shallow niches, or simply piled in the corners of the room.

When I asked about them, Mad Claude was dismissive. "Commoners. Wannabes. Didn't have money for artists and funeral rites, so they tried the do-it-yourself approach."

I looked down at the portrait of the nearest mummy, her face a crude finger-painted image. I wondered if her grieving children had made it—one last gift for their mother. Despite the bad quality, I found it rather sweet. They had no money and no artistic skill, but they'd done their best to lovingly send her to the afterlife. Next time I saw Anubis, I would ask him about this. A woman like that deserved a chance at happiness in the next world, even if she couldn't pay. We had quite enough snobbery in this world without exporting it to the hereafter.

Walt trailed behind us, not speaking. He'd shine his light on this mummy or that, as if pondering each one's fate. I wondered if he was thinking of King Tut, his famous ancestor, whose tomb had been in a cavern not too different from this.

After several more long tunnels and crowded mummy rooms, we arrived in a burial chamber that was clearly much older. The wall paintings had faded, but they looked more authentically Egyptian, with the sideways-walking people and hieroglyphs that actually formed words, rather than simply providing decoration. Instead of realistic facial portraits, the mummies had the generic wide-eyed, smiling faces I'd seen on most Egyptian death masks. A few had crumbled to dust. Others were encased in stone sarcophagi.

"Natives," Mad Claude confirmed. "Egyptian nobles from before Rome took over. What you're looking for should be somewhere in this area."

I scanned the room. The only other doorway was blocked with boulders and debris. While Walt began searching, I remembered what Bes had said—that the first two scrolls of Ra might help me find the third. I pulled them from my bag, hoping they would point the way like a dowsing rod, but nothing happened.

From the other side of the room, Walt called, "What's this?"

He was standing in front of some sort of shrine—a niche set into the wall, with the statue of a man wrapped like a mummy. The figure was carved from wood, decorated with jewels and precious metals. His wrappings glistened like pearl in the light of the torch. He held a golden staff with a silver *djed* symbol on top. Around his feet stood several golden rodents—rats, perhaps. The skin of his face gleamed turquoise blue.

"It's my dad," I guessed. "Er…I mean Osiris, isn't it?"

Mad Claude arched his eyebrows. "Your dad?"

Fortunately, Walt saved me from explaining. "No," he said. "Look at his beard."

The statue's beard was rather unusual. It was pencil thin from his sideburns around his jaw line, with a perfectly straight bit coming down for a goatee—as if someone had traced the beard with a grease pen, then stuck the pen on his chin.

"And the collar," Walt continued. "It's got a tassel thing hanging down in back. You don't see that with Osiris. And those animals at his feet…are those rats? I remember some story about rats—

"I thought you were priests," Mad Claude grumped. "Obviously, the god is Ptah."

"Ptah?" I'd heard quite a few odd Egyptian god names, but this was a new one for me. "Ptah, son of Pitooey? Is he the god of spitting?"

Claude glared at me. "Are you always so irreverent?"

"Usually, more."

"A novice *and* a heretic," he said. "Just my luck. Well, girl, I shouldn't have to teach *you* about your own gods, but as I understand it, Ptah was the god of craftsmen. We compared him to our Roman god Vulcan."

"Then what's he doing in a tomb?" Walt asked.

Claude scratched his nonexistent head. "I've never been sure, actually. You don't see him in most Egyptian funeral rites."

Walt pointed to the statue's staff. When I looked more closely, I realized the *djed* symbol was combined with something else, a curved top that looked strangely familiar.

"That's the symbol *was,*" Walt said. "It means power. Lots of the gods had staffs like that, but I never realized it looks like—"

"Yes, yes," Claude said impatiently. "The priest's ceremonial knife for opening the mouth of the dead. Honestly, you Egyptian priests are hopeless. No wonder we conquered you so easily."

My hand acted quite on its own, reaching into my bag and bringing out the black *netjeri* blade Anubis had given me.

Mad Claude's eyes glinted. "Ah, so you're *not* hopeless. That's perfect! With that knife and the proper spell, you should be able to touch my mummy and release me into the Duat."

"No," I said. "No, there's more to it. The knife, the Book of Ra, this statue of the spit god. It all fits together somehow."

Walt's face lit up. "Sadie, Ptah was more than the craftsman god, right? Didn't they call him the God of Opening?"

"Um…possibly."

"I thought you taught us that. Or maybe it was Carter."

"Boring bit of information? Probably Carter."

"But it's important," Walt insisted. "Ptah was a creation god. In some legends, he created the souls of mankind just by speaking a word. He could revive any soul, and open any door."

My eyes drifted to the debris-filled doorway, the only other exit from the room. "Open any door?"

I held up the two scrolls of Ra and walked toward the collapsed tunnel. The scrolls became uncomfortably warm.

"The last scroll is on the other side," I said. "We need to get past this rubble."

I held the black knife in one hand and the scrolls in the other. I spoke the command for Open. Nothing happened. I went back to the statue of Ptah and tried the same thing. No luck.

"Hullo, Ptah?" I called. "Sorry about the spit comment. Look, we're trying to get the third scroll of Ra, which is on the other side, there. I suppose you were placed here to open a path. So would you mind terribly?"

Still nothing happened.

Mad Claude gripped the trim of his toga as if he wanted to strangle us with it. "Look, I don't know why you need this scroll to free us if you've got the knife. But why don't you try an offering? All gods need offerings."

Walt rummaged through his supplies. He placed a juice pouch and a bit of beef jerky at the foot of the statue. The statue did nothing. Even the gold rats at his feet apparently didn't want our beef jerky.

"Bloody spit god." I threw myself down on the dusty ground. I had a mummy on either side of me, but I didn't care anymore. I couldn't believe we were so close to the last scroll, after fighting demons, gods, and Russian assassins, and now we'd been stopped by a pile of rocks.

"I hate to suggest it," Walt said, "but you could blast through with the *ha-di* spell."

"And bring down the ceiling on top of us?" I said.

"You'd die," Claude agreed. "Which isn't an experience I'd recommend."

Walt knelt next to me. "There's got to be something…" He took stock of his amulets.

Mad Claude paced the room. "I still don't understand. You're priests. You have the ceremonial knife. Why can't you release us?"

"The knife isn't for you!" I snapped. "It's for Ra!"

Walt and Claude both stared at me. I hadn't realized it before, but as soon as I spoke, I knew it was the truth.

"Sorry," I said. "But the knife is used for the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, to free a soul. I'll need it to awaken Ra. That's why Anubis gave it to me."

"You know Anubis!" Claude clapped with delight. "He can free us all! And you—" He pointed at Walt. "You're one of Anubis's chosen, aren't you? You can get us more knives if you need them! I sensed the presence of the god around you as soon as we met. Did you take his service when he realized you were dying?"

"Wait…what?" I asked.

Walt wouldn't meet my eyes. "I'm not a priest of Anubis."

"But *dying?"* I choked up. "How are you dying?"

Mad Claude looked incredulous. "You mean you don't know? He's got the old pharaoh's curse. We didn't see it much in my day, but I recognize it, all right. Occasionally a person from one of the old Egyptian royal lines—"

"Claude, shut up," I said. "Walt, speak. How does this curse work?"

In the dim light, he looked thinner and older. On the wall behind him, his shadow loomed like a deformed monster.

"Akhenaton's curse runs in my family," he said. "Kind of a genetic disease. Not every generation, not every person, but when it strikes, it's bad. Tut died at nineteen. Most of the others… twelve, thirteen. I'm sixteen now. My dad…my dad was eighteen. I never knew him."

"Eighteen?" That alone brought up a host of new questions, but I tried to stay focused. "Can't it be cured…?" Guilt washed over me, and I felt like a total imbecile. "Oh, god. That's why you were talking to Jaz. She's a healer."

Walt nodded grimly. "I thought she might know spells that I hadn't been able to find. My dad's family—they spent years searching. My mom has been looking for a cure since I was born. The doctors in Seattle couldn't do anything."

"Doctors," Mad Claude said with disgust. "I had one in the legion, loved to put leeches on my legs. Only made me worse. Now, about this connection to Anubis, and using that knife…"

Walt shook his head. "Claude, we'll try to help you, but not with the knife. I know magic items. I'm pretty sure it can be used only once, and we can't just make another. If Sadie needs it for Ra, she can't risk using it before that."

"Excuses!" Claude roared.

"If you don't shut up," I warned, "I'm going to find your mummy and draw a mustache on your portrait!"

Claude turned as white as…well, a ghost. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Walt," I said, trying to ignore the Roman, "was Jaz able to help?"

"She tried her best. But this curse has been defying healers for three thousand years. Modern doctors think it's related to sickle cell anemia, but they don't know. They've been trying for decades to figure out how King Tut died, and they can't agree. Some say poison. Some say a genetic disease. It's the curse, but of course they can't say that."

"Isn't there any way? I mean we know *gods*. Perhaps I could cure you like Isis did Ra. If I knew your secret name—"

"Sadie, I've thought of that," he said. "I've thought of everything. The curse can't be cured. It can

only be slowed down if…if I avoid magic. That's why I got into talismans and amulets. They store magic in advance, so they don't require as much from the user. But it's only helped a little bit. I was *born* to do magic, so the curse progresses in me no matter what I do. Some days it's not so bad. Some days my whole body is in pain. When I do magic, it gets worse."

"And the more you do—"

"The faster I die."

I punched him in the chest. I couldn't help it. All my grief and guilt flipped right to anger. "You idiot! Why are you here, then? You should've told me to shove off! Bes warned you to stay in Brooklyn. Why didn't you listen?"

What I told you earlier about Walt's eyes not melting me? I take it back. When he looked at me in that dusty tomb, his eyes were every bit as dark, tender, and sad as Anubis's. "I'm going to die anyway, Sadie. I want my life to mean something. And…I want to spend as much time as I can with you."

That hurt me worse than a punch in the chest. Much worse.

I think I might've kissed him. Or possibly slapped him.

Mad Claude, however, was not a sympathetic audience. "Very sweet, I'm sure, but you promised me payment! Come back to the Roman tombs. Release my spirit from my mummy. Then release the others. After that, you can do as you like."

"The others?" I asked. "Are you mad?"

He stared at me.

"Silly question," I conceded. "But there are thousands of mummies. We have one knife."

"You promised!"

"We did not," I said. "You said we'd discuss a fee *after* we found the scroll. We've found nothing but a dead end here."

The ghost growled, more like a wolf than a human. "If you won't come to us," he said, "we'll come to you."

His spirit glowed, then disappeared in a flash.

I looked nervously at Walt. "What did he mean by that?"

"I don't know," he said. "But we should figure out how to get through that rubble and get out of here—*quickly*."

Despite our best efforts, nothing happened quickly. We couldn't move the debris. There were too many large boulders. We couldn't dig around, over, or under it. I didn't dare risk a *ha-di* spell or use the black knife's magic. Walt had no amulets that would help. I was frankly stumped. The statue of Ptah smiled at us but didn't offer any helpful suggestions, nor did he seem interested in the beef jerky and juice.

Finally, covered with dust, drenched with sweat, I plopped down on a stone sarcophagus and examined my blistered fingers.

Walt sat next to me. "Don't give up. There has to be a way."

"Does there?" I asked, feeling especially resentful. "Like there has to be a cure for you? What if there *isn't*? What if…"

My voice broke. Walt turned his face so it was hidden in shadow.

"I'm sorry," I said. "That was terrible. But I just couldn't stand it if…"

I was so confused, I didn't know what to say, or how I felt. All I knew was that I didn't want to lose Walt.

"Did you mean it?" I asked. "When you said you wanted to spend time…you know."

Walt shrugged. "Isn't it obvious?"

I didn't answer, but, please—*nothing* is obvious with boys. For such simple creatures, they are quite baffling.

I imagined I was blushing fiercely, so I decided to change the subject.

"Claude said he sensed the spirit of Anubis about you. You've been talking to Anubis a lot?"

Walt turned his rings. "I thought maybe he could help me. Maybe grant me a little extra time before…before the end. I wanted to be around long enough to help you defeat Apophis. Then I'd feel like I did something with my life. And…there were other reasons I wanted to talk to him. About some—some powers I've been developing."

"What sort of powers?"

It was Walt's turn to change the subject. He looked at his hands like they'd become dangerous weapons. "The thing is, I almost didn't come to Brooklyn. When I got the *djed* amulet—that calling card you guys sent—my mom didn't want me to leave. She knew that learning magic would make the curse accelerate. Part of me was afraid to go. Part of me was angry. It seemed like a cruel joke. You guys offered to train me for magic when I knew I wouldn't survive longer than a year or two."

"A year or two?" I could hardly breathe. I'd always thought of a year as an incredibly long time. I'd waited *forever* to turn thirteen. And each school term seemed like an eternity. But suddenly two years seemed much too short. I'd only be fifteen, not even driving yet. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to know that I would die in two years—possibly sooner, if I continued doing what I was born to do, practicing magic. "Why did you come to Brooklyn, then?"

"I had to," Walt said. "I've lived my whole life under the threat of death. My mom made everything so serious, so *huge*. But when I got to Brooklyn, I felt like I had a destiny, a purpose. Even if it made the curse more painful, it was worth it."

"But it's so bloody unfair."

Walt looked at me, and I realized he was smiling. "That's *my* line. I've been saying that for years. Sadie, I *want* to be here. The past two months I've felt like I'm actually living for the first time. And getting to know you…" He cleared his throat. He was quite attractive when he got nervous. "I started worrying about small things. My hair. My clothes. Whether I brushed my teeth. I mean, I'm *dying,* and I'm worrying about my teeth."

"You have lovely teeth."

He laughed. "That's what I mean. A little comment like that, and I feel better. All these small things suddenly seem important. I don't feel like I'm dying. I feel happy."

Personally, I felt miserable. For months I'd dreamed about Walt admitting he liked me, but not like this—not like, *I can be honest with you, because I'm dying anyway.*

Something he'd said was nagging at me, too. It reminded me of a lesson I'd taught at Brooklyn House, and an idea began to form in my mind.

"'Small things suddenly seem important,'" I repeated. I looked down at a little mound of rubble we'd cleared from the blocked doorway. "Oh, it couldn't be that easy."

"What?" asked Walt.

"Rocks."

"I just bared my soul, and you're thinking about rocks?"

"The doorway," I said. "Sympathetic magic. Do you think…"

He blinked. "Sadie Kane, you're a genius."

"Well I *know* that. But can we make it work?"

Walt and I began gathering up more pebbles. We chipped some pieces from the larger boulders and added them to our pile. We tried our best to make a miniature replica of the rubble collection blocking the doorway.

My hope, of course, was to create a sympathetic bond, as I'd done with Carter and the wax figurine in Alexandria. The rocks in our replica pile came from the collapsed tunnel, so our pile and the original were already connected in substance, which should have made it easy to establish a link. But moving something very large with something very small is always tricky. If we didn't do it carefully, we could collapse the whole room. I didn't know how deep underground we were, but I imagined there was quite enough rock and dirt over our heads to bury us forever.

"Ready?" I asked.

Walt nodded and pulled out his wand.

"Oh, no, cursed boy," I said. "You just watch my back. If the ceiling starts to fall and we need a shield, that's your job. But you'll do no magic unless absolutely necessary. I'll clear the doorway."

"Sadie, I'm not fragile," he complained. "I don't need a protector."

"Rubbish," I said. "That's macho bluster, and all boys like to be mothered."

"What? God, you're annoying!"

I smiled sweetly. "You did want to spend time with me."

Before he could protest, I raised my wand and began the spell.

I imagined a bond between our small pile of rubble and the debris in the doorway. I imagined that in the Duat, they were one and the same. I spoke the command for *join*:

"Hi-nehm."

The symbol burned faintly over our miniature rubble pile.

Slowly and carefully, I brushed a few pebbles away from the pile. The debris in the corridor rumbled.

"It's working," Walt said.

I didn't dare look. I stayed focused on my task—moving the pebbles a little at a time, dispersing the pile into smaller mounds. It was almost as hard as moving real boulders. I went into a daze. When Walt put his hand on my shoulder, I had no idea how much time had passed. I was so exhausted I

couldn't see straight.

"It's done," he said. "You did great."

The doorway was clear. The rubble had been pushed into the corners of our room, where it lay in smaller piles.

"Nice job, Sadie." Walt leaned down and kissed me. He was probably just expressing appreciation or happiness, but the kiss didn't make me feel any less fuzzyheaded.

"Um," I said—again with the incredible verbal skills.

Walt helped me to my feet. We headed down the corridor into the next room. For all the work we'd done to get there, the room wasn't very exciting, just a five-meter-square chamber with nothing inside except a red lacquered box on a sandstone pedestal. On top of the box was a carved wooden handle shaped like a demonic greyhound with tall ears—the Set animal.

"Oh, that can't be good," Walt said.

But I walked straight up to the box, opened the lid, and grabbed the scroll inside.

"Sadie!" Walt yelled.

"What?" I turned. "It's Set's box. If he'd wanted to kill me, he could've done so in St. Petersburg. He *wants* me to have this scroll. Probably thinks it'll be fun watching me kill myself trying to awaken Ra." I looked up at the ceiling and shouted, "Isn't that right, Set?"

My voice echoed through the catacombs. I no longer had the power to invoke Set's secret name, but I still felt as if I'd gotten his attention. The air turned sharper. The ground trembled as if something underneath it, something very large, was laughing.

Walt exhaled. "I wish you wouldn't take chances like that."

"This from a boy who's willing to die to spend time with me?"

Walt made an exaggerated bow. "I take it back, Miss Kane. Please, go right ahead trying to kill yourself."

"Thank you."

I looked at the three scrolls in my hands—the entire Book of Ra, together for probably the first time since Mad Claude wore little Roman diapers. I had collected the scrolls, done the impossible, triumphed beyond all expectations. Yet it still wouldn't be enough unless we could find Ra and wake him before Apophis rose. "No time to waste," I said. "Let's get—"

Deep moaning echoed through the corridors, as if something—or a whole *host* of somethings—had woken up in a very bad mood.

"Out of here," Walt said. "Great idea."

As we ran through the previous chamber, I glanced at the statue of Ptah. I was tempted to take back the jerky and juice, just to be mean, but I decided against it.

I suppose it isn't your fault, I thought. *Can't be easy to have a name like Ptah. Enjoy the snack, but I do wish you'd helped us.*

We ran on. It wasn't easy to remember our path. Twice we had to double back before finding the room with the family of mummies where we'd met Mad Claude.

I was about to bolt blindly across the chamber and into the last tunnel, but Walt held me back and

saved my life. He shined his light on the far exit, then on the corridors to either side.

"No," I said. "No, no, no."

All three doorways were clogged with human figures wrapped in linen. They pressed together as far as I could see down each corridor. Some were still completely bound. They hopped and shuffled and waddled forward as if they were giant cocoons engaged in a sack race. Other mummies had partially broken free. They limped along on emaciated legs, hands like dried branches clawing at their wrappings. Most still wore their painted-face portraits, and the effect was gruesome—lifelike masks smiling serenely at the top of undead scarecrows of bones and painted linen.

"I hate mummies," I whimpered.

"Maybe a fire spell," Walt said. "They've got to burn easily."

"We'll burn ourselves, too! It's too close in here."

"You have a better idea?"

I wanted to cry. Freedom so near—and just as I'd feared, we were trapped by a crowd of mummies. But these were worse than movie mummies. They were silent and slow, pathetic ruined things that once were human.

One of the mummies on the floor grabbed my leg. Before I could even scream, Walt reached out and tapped the thing on the wrist. The mummy instantly turned to dust.

I stared at him in amazement. "Is *that* the power you were worried about? That was brilliant! Do it again!"

Immediately I felt awful suggesting it. Walt's face was tight with pain.

"I can't do it a thousand more times," he said sadly. "Maybe if…"

Then, on the central dais, the mummy family began to stir.

I will not lie. When the child-size mummy of little Purpens sat up, I almost had an accident that would've ruined my new jeans. If my *ba* could've shed my skin and flown away, it would have.

I gripped Walt's arm.

At the far end of the room, the ghost of Mad Claude flickered into view. As he walked toward us, the rest of the mummies began to stir.

"You should be honored, my friends." He gave us a crazy grin. "It takes a lot of excitement for *ba* to return to their withered old bodies. But we simply can't let you leave until you've freed us for the afterlife. Use the knife, do your spells, and you can go."

"We can't free you all!" I shouted.

"A shame," Claude said. "Then we'll take the knife and free ourselves. I suppose two more bodies in the catacombs won't make any difference."

He said something in Latin, and all the mummies surged toward us, shuffling and tripping, falling and rolling. Some crumbled to pieces as they tried to walk. Others fell down and were trampled by their fellows. But more came forward.

We backed into the corridor. I had my staff in one hand. With my other, I held tight to Walt's hand. I'd never been good at summoning fire, but I managed to set the end of my staff ablaze.

"We'll try it your way," I told Walt. "Light them up and run."

I knew it was a bad idea. In close quarters, a blaze would hurt us as much as the mummies. We'd

die of smoke inhalation or suffocation or heat. Even if we managed to retreat back into the catacombs, we'd just get lost and run into more mummies.

Walt lit his own staff.

"On three," I suggested. I stared in horror at the child's mummy coming toward us, the portrait of a seven-year-old boy smiling at me from beyond the grave. "One, two—"

I faltered. The mummies were only a meter away, but from behind me came a new sound—like water running. No—like skittering. A mass of living things charging toward us, thousands and thousands of tiny claws on stone, possibly insects or…

"Three comes next," Walt said nervously. "Are we torching them or not?"

"Hug the walls!" I shrieked. I didn't know exactly what was coming, but I knew I didn't want to be in their way. I pushed Walt against the stone and flattened myself next to him, our faces pressed against the wall, as a wave of claws and fur slammed into us and rolled over our backs: an army of rodents scuttling five-deep along the floor and racing horizontally across the walls, defying gravity.

Rats. Thousands of rats.

They ran straight over us, doing no damage except for the odd claw scratch. Not so bad, you might think, but have you ever been upright and trampled by an army of filthy rats? Do not pay money for the experience.

The rats flooded the burial chamber. They tore into the mummies, clawing and chewing and squealing their tiny battle cries. The mummies writhed under the assault, but they didn't stand a chance. The room was a hurricane of fur, teeth, and shredded linen. It was like the old cartoons of termites swarming over wood and dissolving it to nothing.

"No!" yelled Mad Claude. "No!"

But he was the only one screaming. The mummies withered silently under the fury of the rats.

"I'll get you!" Claude snarled as his spirit began to flicker. "I'll have my revenge!"

And with one final evil glare, his image faded and was gone.

The rats divided their forces and scurried off down all three corridors, chewing through mummies as they went, until the room was silent and empty, the floor littered with dust, shreds of linen, and a few bones.

Walt looked shaken. I fell against him and hugged him. I probably cried with relief. I was so glad to hold a warm living human being.

"It's okay." He stroked my hair, which felt awfully good. "That—that was the story about rats."

"What?" I managed.

"They…they saved Memphis. An enemy army besieged the city, and the people prayed for help. Their patron god sent a horde of rats. They ate the enemy's bowstrings, their sandals, everything they could chew. The attackers had to withdraw."

"The patron god—you mean—"

"Me." From the exit corridor across the room, an Egyptian farmer stepped into view. He wore grubby robes, a head wrap, and sandals. He held a rifle at his side. He grinned at us, and as he got closer, I saw his eyes were blank white. His skin had a slightly bluish tint, as if he were suffocating and really enjoying the experience.

"Sorry I didn't answer sooner," said the farmer. "I am Ptah. And no, Sadie Kane, I am not the

god of spit."

"Please, have a seat," the god said. "Sorry about the mess, but what do expect from Romans? They never did clean up after themselves."

Neither Walt nor I sat. A grinning god with a rifle was a bit off-putting.

"Ah, quite right." Ptah blinked his blank white eyes. "You're in a hurry."

"Sorry," I said. "Are you a date farmer?"

Ptah looked down at his grubby robes. "I'm just borrowing this poor fellow for a minute, you understand. I thought you wouldn't mind, as he was coming down here to shoot you for destroying his water tower."

"No, carry on," I said. "But the mummies—what will happen to their *ba*?"

Ptah laughed. "Don't worry about them. Now that their remains are destroyed, I imagine their *ba* will go on to whatever Roman afterlife awaits them. As it should be."

He put his hand over his mouth and burped. A cloud of white gas billowed out, coalesced into a glowing *ba,* and flew off down the corridor.

Walt pointed after the spirit bird. "Did you just—"

"Yes." Ptah sighed. "I really try not to talk at all. That's how I create, you see, with words. They can get me into trouble. Once just for fun I made up the word 'platypus' and—"

Instantly, a duckbilled, furry thing appeared on the floor, scrabbling around in a panic.

"Oh, dear," Ptah said. "Yes, that's exactly what happened. Slip of the tongue. Really the only way something like that could have been created."

He waved his hand, and the platypus disappeared. "At any rate, I have to be careful, so I can't talk long. I'm glad you found the Book of Ra! I always did like the old chap. I would have helped earlier, when you asked, but it took a while to get here from the Duat. Also, I can open only one door per customer. I thought you had that blocked corridor well in hand. But there's a much more important door that you need."

"Sorry?" I asked.

"Your brother," Ptah said. "He's in a great deal of trouble."

As exhausted, bedraggled, and covered with rat scratches as I was, that news set my nerves tingling. Carter needed help. I had to save my brother's ridiculous hide.

"Can you send us there?" I asked.

Ptah smiled. "Thought you'd never ask."

He pointed to the nearest wall. The stones dissolved into a portal of swirling sand.

"And, my dear, some words of advice." Ptah's milky eyes studied me. "Courage. Hope. Sacrifice."

I wasn't sure whether he was reading those qualities within me, or giving me a pep talk, or perhaps *creating* the traits I needed, the way he'd created the *ba* and the platypus. Whatever the case, I suddenly felt warmer inside, filled with new energy.

"You're beginning to understand," he told me. "Words are the source of all power. And names are more than just a collection of letters. Well done, Sadie. You may succeed yet."

I stared at the funnel of sand. “What will we face on the other side?”

“Enemies and friends,” Ptah said. “But which are which, I can’t say. If you survive, go to the top of the Great Pyramid. That should do nicely for an entry point into the Duat. When you read the Book of Ra—“

He choked, doubling over and dropping his rifle.

“I must go,” he said, straightening with a great deal of effort. “This host can’t stand any more. But, Walt…” He smiled sadly. “Thank you for the beef jerky and juice. There *is* an answer for you. It’s not one you’ll like, but it is the best way.”

“What do you mean?” Walt asked. “What answer?”

The farmer blinked. Suddenly his eyes were normal. He looked at us in surprise, then yelled something in Arabic and raised his gun.

I grabbed Walt’s hand, and together we jumped into the portal.

CARTER

17. Menshikov Hires a Happy Death Squad

I GUESS WE'RE EVEN, SADIE. First, Walt and I rushed off to save you in London. Then, you and Walt rushed off to save me. The only one who got shafted on both deals was Walt. Poor guy gets hauled all over the world pulling us out of trouble. But I'll admit I needed the help.

Bes was locked in a glowing fluorescent cage. Zia was convinced we were enemies. My sword and wand were gone. I was holding a crook and flail that were apparently stolen property, and two of the most powerful magicians in the world, Michel Desjardins and Vlad the Inhaler, were ready to arrest me, try me, and execute me—not necessarily in that order.

I backed up to the steps of Zia's tomb, but there was no place to go. Red mud stretched in all directions, dotted with wreckage and dead fish. I couldn't run or hide, which gave me two options: surrender, or fight.

Menshikov's scarred eyes glittered. "Feel free to resist, Kane. Using deadly force would make my job *so* much easier."

"Vladimir, stop," Desjardins said wearily, leaning on his staff. "Carter, don't be foolish. Surrender now."

Three months ago, Desjardins would've been thrilled to blast me to bits. Now he looked sad and tired, like my execution was an unpleasant necessity. Zia stood next to him. She glanced warily at Menshikov, as if she could sense something evil about the man.

If I could use that, possibly buy some time…

"What's your plan, Vlad?" I asked. "You let us get away from St. Petersburg too easily. Almost like you *want* us to awaken Ra."

The Russian laughed. "Is that why I followed you halfway across the world to stop you?"

He did his best to look scornful, but a smile tugged at his lips, as if we were sharing a private joke.

"You didn't come to stop me," I guessed. "You're counting on us to find the scrolls for you and put them together. Do you need Ra to wake up in order to free Apophis?"

"Enough, Carter." Desjardins spoke in a monotone, like a surgery patient counting backward waiting for anesthesia to kick in. I didn't understand why he seemed so apathetic, but Menshikov looked angry enough for both of them. From the hatred in the Russian's eyes, I could tell I'd struck a nerve.

"That's it, isn't it?" I said. "Ma'at and Chaos are connected. To free Apophis, you have to wake Ra, but you want to control the summoning, make sure Ra comes back old and weak."

Menshikov's new oaken staff burst into green flames. "Boy, you have no idea what you are

saying."

"Set teased you about a past mistake," I remembered. "You tried to awaken Ra once before, didn't you? Using what—only the one scroll you had? Is that how you burned your face?"

"Carter!" Desjardins interrupted. "Vlad Menshikov is a hero of the House of Life. He tried to *destroy* that scroll to keep anyone else from using it. *That's* how he was injured."

For a moment I was too stunned to speak. "That…can't be true."

"You should do your homework, boy." Menshikov fixed his ruined eyes on me. "The Menshikovs are descended from the priests of Amun-Ra. You've heard of that temple?"

I tried to recall the stories my dad had told me. I knew Amun-Ra was another name for Ra, the sun god. And his temple…

"They pretty much controlled Egypt for centuries," I remembered. "They opposed Akhenaton when he outlawed the old gods, maybe even assassinated him."

"Indeed," Menshikov said. "My ancestors were champions of the gods! They are the ones who *created* the Book of Ra and hid its three sections, hoping that someday, a worthy magician would reawaken their sun god."

I tried to wrap my mind around that. I could totally see Vlad Menshikov as an ancient bloodthirsty priest. "But if you're descended from priests of Ra—"

"Why do I oppose the gods?" Menshikov glanced at the Chief Lector as if I'd asked a predictably stupid question. "Because the gods destroyed our civilization! By the time Egypt fell and Lord Iskandar banned the path of the gods, even *my* family had come to realize the truth. The old ways must be forbidden. Yes, I tried to destroy the scroll, to make up for the sins of my ancestors. Those who summon the gods must be wiped out."

I shook my head. "I *saw* you summon Set. I heard you talk about freeing Apophis. Desjardins, Zia—this guy is lying. He's going to kill you both."

Desjardins looked at me in a kind of daze. Amos had insisted the Chief Lector was smart, so how could he not understand the threat?

"No more," Desjardins said. "Come peacefully, Carter Kane, or be destroyed."

I gave Zia one more pleading look. I could see the doubt in her eyes, but she wasn't in any shape to help me. She'd just woken up from a three-month-long nightmare. She wanted to believe the House of Life was still her home and Desjardins and Menshikov were the good guys. She didn't want to hear any more about Apophis.

I raised the crook and flail. "I'm not going peacefully."

Menshikov nodded. "Then, destruction it is."

He pointed his staff at me, and my instincts took over. I lashed out with the crook.

I was much too far away to reach him, but some invisible force ripped the staff out of Menshikov's hand and sent it flying into the Nile. He held out his wand, but I slashed the air again, and Menshikov went flying. He landed on his back so hard, he made a mud angel.

"Carter!" Desjardins pushed Zia behind him. His own staff lit with purple fire. "You dare to use the weapons of Ra?"

I looked at my hands in amazement. I'd never felt so much power come to me so easily—as if I were meant to be a king. In the back of my mind, I heard Horus's voice, urging me on: *This is your*

path. This is your birthright.

"You're going to kill me anyway," I told Desjardins.

My body began to glow. I rose off the ground. For the first time since New Year's, I was encased in the avatar of the hawk god—a falcon-headed warrior three times my normal size. In its hands were massive holographic replicas of the crook and flail. I hadn't paid much attention to the flail, but it was a wicked pain-bringer—a wooden handle with three barbed chains, each topped by a spiky metal asterisk—like a combination whip and meat tenderizer. I took a swipe at the ground, and the falcon warrior mirrored my action. The glowing flail pulverized the stone steps of Zia's tomb, sending blocks of limestone flying through the air.

Desjardins raised a shield to deflect the shards. Zia's eyes widened. I knew I was probably freaking her out and convincing her I was the bad guy, but I had to protect her. I couldn't let Menshikov take her away.

"Combat magic," Desjardins said with disdain. "This is what the House of Life was like when we followed the path of the gods, Carter Kane: magician fighting magician, backstabbing and duels between the different temples. Do you want those times to return?"

"It doesn't have to be that way," I said. "I don't want to fight you, Desjardins, but Menshikov is a traitor. Get out of here. Let me deal with him."

Menshikov rose from the mud, smiling like he enjoyed getting thrown around. "Deal with me? How confident! By all means, Chief Lector, let the boy try. I'll be sure to pick up the pieces when I'm done."

Desjardins started to say, "Vladimir, no. It's not your place—"

But Menshikov didn't wait. He stomped the ground with his foot, and the mud turned dry and white all around him. Twin lines of hardening earth snaked toward me, crossing like a DNA helix. I wasn't sure what they would do, but I knew I didn't want them touching me. I smashed at them with my flail, taking out a section of mud large enough for a hot tub. The white lines just kept coming, bleaching their way down the pit and climbing the other side, racing toward me. I tried to move out of their way, but the warrior avatar wasn't exactly speedy.

The lines of magic reached my feet. They wove like vines up the avatar's legs until I was tangled to the waist. They squeezed against my shielding, draining my magic, and I heard Menshikov's voice forcing its way into my mind.

Snake, the voice whispered. *You are a slithering reptile.*

I fought back my terror. I'd been turned into an animal against my will once before, and it was one of the worst experiences of my life. This time, it was happening in slow motion. The combat avatar fought to maintain its form, but Menshikov's magic was strong. The glowing white vines kept rising, encircling my chest.

I swiped at Menshikov with my crook. The invisible force hooked him around the neck and lifted him off the ground.

"Do it!" he choked out. "Show me—your power—godling!"

I raised my flail. One good hit, and I could smash Vlad Menshikov like a bug.

"Won't matter!" he gasped, clawing at his neck. "Spell will —defeat you anyway. Show us you're—a murderer, Kane!"

I glanced at Zia's terrified face, and I hesitated too long. The white vines encircled my arms. The combat avatar crumpled to its knees, and I dropped Menshikov.

Pain wracked my body. My blood turned cold. The avatar's limbs shrank, the hawk's head slowly changing into the head of a serpent. I could feel my heart slowing, my vision darkening. The taste of venom filled my mouth.

Zia cried out. "Stop it! This is too much!"

"On the contrary," Menshikov said, rubbing his chafed neck. "He deserves worse. Chief Lector, you saw how this boy threatened you. He wants the pharaoh's throne. He must be destroyed."

Zia tried to run to me, but Desjardins held her back.

"Discontinue the spell, Vladimir," he said. "The boy can be contained in more humane ways."

"Humane, my lord? He's barely human!"

The two magicians locked eyes. I don't know what would've happened—but just then a portal opened under Bes's cage.

I've seen plenty of portals, but none like this. The whirlpool opened level with the ground, sucking down a trampoline-size area of red sand, dead fish, old lumber, pottery shards, and one glowing fluorescent cage containing a dwarf god. As the cage entered the vortex, the bars broke into splinters of light. Bes unfroze, found himself halfway submerged in sand, and did some creative cursing. Then my sister and Walt shot straight up out of the portal, suspended horizontally, as if they were running toward the sky. When gravity took over, they waved their arms and fell back into the sand. They might've been pulled under except Bes grabbed them both and managed to haul them out of the whirlpool.

Bes dumped them on firm ground. Then he turned to Vlad Menshikov, planted his feet, and ripped off his Hawaiian shirt and shorts like they were made of tissue. His eyes blazed with anger. His Speedo was embroidered with the words *Dwarf Pride,* which was something I really didn't need to see.

Menshikov only had time to say, "How—"

"BOO!" yelled Bes.

The sound was like the blast of an H-bomb—or a U-bomb, for *Ugly.* The ground shook. The river rippled. My avatar collapsed, and Menshikov's spell dissolved with it—the venom taste in my mouth subsiding, the pressure lifting so I could breathe again. Sadie and Walt were already on the ground. Zia had quickly backed away. But Menshikov and Desjardins got a full blast of ugly right in their faces.

Their expressions turned to astonishment, and they disintegrated on the spot.

After a moment of shock, Zia gasped. "You killed them!"

"Nah." Bes dusted off his hands. "Just scared 'em back home. They may be unconscious for a few hours while their brains try to process my magnificent physique, but they'll live. More important —" He scowled at Sadie and Walt. "You two had the nerve to anchor a portal on *me*? Do I look like a relic?"

Sadie and Walt wisely didn't answer that. They got to their feet, brushing off the sand.

"It wasn't our idea!" Sadie protested. "Ptah sent us here to help you."

"Ptah?" I said. "Ptah, the *god*?"

"No, Ptah the date farmer. I'll tell you later."

"What's wrong with your hair?" I asked. "It looks like a camel licked it."

"Shut up." Then she noticed Zia. "My god, is that her? The real Zia?"

Zia stumbled back, trying to light up her staff. "Get away!" The fire spluttered weakly.

"We're not going to hurt you," Sadie promised.

Zia's legs shook. Her hands trembled. Then she did the only logical thing for someone who'd been through her kind of day after a three-month coma. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she passed out.

Bes grunted. "Strong girl. She held up under a full frontal BOO! Still…we'd better pick her up and get out of here. Desjardins won't stay gone forever."

"Sadie," I said, "did you get the scroll?"

She pulled all three scrolls out of her bag. Part of me was relieved. Part of me was frightened.

"We need to get to the Great Pyramid," she said. "Please tell me you have a car."

Not only did we have a car, we had a whole bunch of Bedouins. We returned their truck well after dark, but the Bedouins seemed happy to see us, even though we'd brought three extra people, one of them unconscious. Somehow Bes made a deal with them to drive us to Cairo. After a few minutes talking in their tent, he emerged wearing new robes. The Bedouins came out ripping the remains of his Hawaiian shirt into strips, which they carefully wrapped around their arms, their radio antenna, and their rearview mirror as good luck talismans.

We piled into the back of the truck. It was too crowded and noisy to talk much as we drove to Cairo. Bes told us to get some sleep while he kept watch. He promised he'd be nice to Zia if she woke up.

Sadie and Walt went straight to sleep, but I stared at the stars for a while. I was painfully aware of Zia—the *real* Zia—sleeping fitfully right next to me, and the magic weapons of Ra, the crook and the flail, now stashed in my bag. My body was still buzzing from the battle. Menshikov's spell had been broken, but I could still hear his voice in my head, trying to turn me into a cold-blooded reptile—sort of like him.

Finally, I managed to close my eyes. Without magical protection, my *ba* drifted as soon as I fell asleep.

I found myself in the Hall of Ages, in front of the pharaoh's throne. Between the columns on either side, holographic images shimmered. Just as Sadie had described, the edge of the magic curtain was turning from red to deep purple —indicating a new age. The images in purple were hard to make out, but I thought I saw two figures grappling in front of a burning chair.

"Yes," said the voice of Horus. "The battle approaches."

He appeared in a ripple of light, standing on the steps of the dais where the Chief Lector usually sat. He was in human form, a muscular young man with bronze skin and a shaved head. Jewels glinted on his leather battle armor, and his *khopesh* hung at his side. His eyes gleamed—one gold, one silver.

"How did you get here?" I asked. "Isn't this place shielded against gods?"

"I'm not here, Carter. *You* are. But we were once joined. I am an echo in your mind—the part of Horus that never left you."

"I don't understand."

"Just listen. Your situation has changed. You stand on the threshold of greatness."

He pointed at my chest. I looked down and realized I wasn't in my usual *ba* form. Instead of a bird, I was a human, dressed like Horus in Egyptian armor. In my hands were the crook and flail.

"These aren't mine," I said. "They were buried with Zia."

"They could be yours," Horus said. "They are the symbols of the pharaoh—like staff and wand, only a hundred times more powerful. Even with no practice, you were able to channel their power. Imagine what we could do together." He gestured to the empty throne. "You could unite the House of Life as its leader. We could crush our enemies."

I won't deny: part of me felt a thrill. Months ago, the idea of being a leader scared me to death. Now things had changed. My own understanding of magic had grown. I'd spent three months teaching and turning our initiates into a team. I understood the threat we were facing more clearly, and I was beginning to understand how to channel the power of Horus without being overwhelmed. What if Horus was right, and I could lead the gods and magicians against Apophis? I liked the idea of smashing our enemies, getting back at the forces of Chaos that had turned our lives upside down.

Then I remembered the way Zia had looked at me when I was about to kill Vlad Menshikov—like *I* was the monster. I remembered what Desjardins had said about the bad old days when magician fought magician. If Horus was an echo in my mind, maybe I was being affected by his desire to rule. I knew Horus well now. He was a good guy in many ways—brave, honorable, righteous. But he was also ambitious, greedy, jealous, and single-minded when it came to his goals. And his biggest desire was to rule the gods.

"The crook and flail belong to Ra," I said. "We have to wake him."

Horus tilted his head. "Even though Apophis wants that to happen? Even though Ra is weak and old? I warned you about the divisions between the gods. You saw how Nekhbet and Babi tried to take matters into their own hands. The strife will only get worse. Chaos feeds on weak leaders, divided loyalties. That's what Vladimir Menshikov is after."

The Hall of Ages trembled. Along either wall, the curtain of purple light expanded. As the holographic scene widened, I could tell that the chair was a fiery throne, like the one Sadie had described in her vision of Ra's boat. Two shadowy figures were locked in combat, grappling like wrestlers, but I couldn't tell if they were trying to push each other *into* the chair, or trying to keep each other out of it.

"Did Menshikov really try to destroy the Book of Ra?" I asked.

Horus's silver eye glinted. It always seemed a little brighter than his golden one, which made me feel disoriented, like the whole world was listing to one side. "Like most things Menshikov says, it was a *partial* truth. He once believed as you do. He thought he could bring back Ra and restore Ma'at. He imagined himself as the high priest of a glorious new temple, even more powerful than his ancestors. In his pride, he thought he could reconstruct the Book of Ra from the one scroll in his possession. He was wrong. Ra had taken great pains not to be wakened. The curses on the scroll burned Menshikov's eyes. Sun fire seared his throat because he dared to read the words of the spell. After that, Menshikov turned bitter. At first he plotted to destroy the Book of Ra, but he did not have the power. Then he hit upon a new plan. He would awaken Ra, but for revenge. That's what he's been waiting for, all these years. That's why he wants you to collect the scrolls and reconstruct the Book of Ra. Menshikov wants to see the old god swallowed by Apophis. He wants to see the world plunged

into darkness and chaos. He is quite insane."

"Oh."

[Great response, I know. But what do you say to a story like that?]

On the dais next to Horus, the empty throne of the pharaoh seemed to undulate in the purple light. That chair had always intimidated me. Long ago, the pharaoh had been the most powerful ruler in the world. He had controlled an empire that lasted twenty times longer than my own country, the U.S., had existed. How could I be worthy of sitting there?

"You can do it, Carter," Horus urged. "You can take control. Why take the risk of summoning Ra? Your sister will have to read the Book, you know. You saw what happened to Menshikov when just one scroll backfired. Can you imagine if three times that much power is unleashed on your sister?"

My mouth went dry. Bad enough I'd let Sadie go off to find the last scroll without me. How could I let her take a risk that might scar her like Vlad the Inhaler, or worse?

"You see the truth now," Horus said. "Claim the crook and flail for yourself. Take the throne. Together, we can defeat Apophis. We can return to Brooklyn and protect your friends and your home."

Home. That sounded so tempting. And our friends were in terrible danger. I'd seen firsthand what Vlad Menshikov could do. I imagined little Felix or timid Cleo trying to fight against that kind of magic. I imagined Menshikov turning our young initiates into helpless snakes. I wasn't even sure Amos could stand against him. With the weapons of Ra, I could protect Brooklyn House.

Then I looked at the purple images flickering against the wall—two figures fighting before the fiery throne. That was our future. The key to success wasn't me, or even Horus—it was Ra, the original king of Egyptian gods. Next to the fiery throne of Ra, the pharaoh's seat seemed about as important as a La-Z-Boy recliner.

"We're not enough," I told Horus. "We need Ra."

The god fixed me with his gold and silver eyes like I was a small bit of prey miles below him, and he was considering whether or not I was worth diving for.

"You do not understand the threat," he decided. "Stay, Carter. And listen to your enemies plan your death."

Horus disappeared.

I heard footsteps in the shadows behind the throne, then familiar raspy breathing. I hoped my *ba* was invisible. Vladimir Menshikov stepped into the light, half-carrying his boss, Desjardins.

"Almost there, my lord," Menshikov said.

The Russian looked well rested in a new white suit. The only sign of our recent fight was the bandage on his neck from where I'd crooked him. Desjardins, however, looked like he'd aged a decade in a few hours. He stumbled along, leaning on Menshikov. His face was gaunt. His hair had turned stark white, and I didn't think it was all because he had seen Bes in a Speedo.

Menshikov tried to ease him onto the pharaoh's throne, but Desjardins protested. "Never, Vladimir. The step. The step."

"But surely, lord, in your condition—"

"Never!" Desjardins settled on the steps at the foot of the throne. I couldn't believe how much worse he looked.

"Ma'at is failing." Desjardins held out his hand. A weak cloud of hieroglyphs drifted from his fingertips into the air. "The power of Ma'at once sustained me, Vladimir. Now it seems to be sapping my life force. It is all I can do…" His voice trailed off.

"Fear not, my lord," Menshikov said. "Once the Kanes are dealt with, all will be well."

"Will it?" Desjardins looked up, and for a moment his eyes flared with anger like they used to. "Don't you ever have doubts, Vladimir?"

"No, my lord," said the Russian. "I have given my life to fighting the gods. I will continue to do so. If I may be so bold, Chief Lector, you should not have allowed Amos Kane into your presence. His words are like poison."

Desjardins caught a hieroglyph from the air and studied it as it revolved in his palm. I didn't recognize the symbol, but it reminded me of a traffic light with a stick figure guy standing next to it.

"Menhed," Desjardins said. "The scribe's palette."

I looked at the dimly flickering symbol, and I could see the resemblance to the writing tools in my supply bag. The rectangle was the palette, with places for black and red ink. The stick figure on one side was a writing stylus, attached with a string.

"Yes, my lord," Menshikov said. "How…interesting."

"It was my grandfather's favorite symbol," Desjardins mused. "Jean-François Champollion, you know. He broke the code of hieroglyphics using the Rosetta Stone—the first man outside the House of Life to do so."

"Indeed, my lord. I have heard the story." *A thousand times,* his expression seemed to say.

"He rose from nothing to become a great scientist," Desjardins continued, *"and* a great magician —respected by mortals and magicians alike."

Menshikov smiled like he was humoring a child who was becoming annoying. "And now you are Chief Lector. He would be proud."

"Would he?" Desjardins wondered. "When Iskandar accepted my family into the House of Life, he said he welcomed the new blood and new ideas. He hoped we would reinvigorate the House. Yet what did we contribute? We changed nothing. We questioned nothing. The House has grown weak. We have fewer initiates every year."

"Ah, my lord." Menshikov bared his teeth. "Let me show you we are *not* weak. Your attack force is assembled."

He clapped his hands. At the far end of the hall, the huge bronze doors opened. At first I couldn't believe my eyes, but as the small army marched toward us, I got more and more alarmed.

The dozen magicians were the *least* scary part of the group. They were mostly older men and women in traditional linen robes. Many had kohl around their eyes and hieroglyphic tattoos on their hands and faces. Some wore more amulets than Walt. The men had shaved heads; the women wore their hair short or tied back in ponytails. All of them had grim expressions, like an angry mob of peasants out to burn the Frankenstein monster, except instead of pitchforks they were armed with

staffs and wands. Several had swords, too.

Marching on either side of them were demons—about twenty in all. I'd fought demons before, but something about these was different. They moved with more confidence, like they shared a sense of purpose. They radiated evil so strongly my *ba* felt like it was getting a suntan. Their skin was every color from green to black to violet. Some were dressed in armor, some in animal hides, some in flannel pajamas. One had a chain saw for a head. Another had a guillotine. A third had a foot sprouting between his shoulders.

Even scarier than the demons were the winged snakes. Yeah, I know, you're thinking: "Not more snakes!" Believe me, after getting bit by the *tjesu heru* in St. Petersburg, I wasn't happy to see them either. These weren't three-headed, and they weren't any bigger than normal snakes, but just looking at them gave me the creeps. Imagine a cobra with the wings of an eagle. Now imagine it zipping through the air, exhaling long jets of fire like a flamethrower. Half a dozen of these monsters circled the attack squad, darting in and out and spitting fire. It was a miracle none of the magicians got torched.

As the group approached, Desjardins struggled to his feet. The magicians and demons knelt before him. One of the winged snakes flew in front of the Chief Lector, and Desjardins snatched it out of the air with surprising speed. The snake wriggled in his fist, but didn't try to strike.

"A *uraeus*?" Desjardins asked. "This is dangerous, Vladimir. These are creatures of Ra."

Menshikov inclined his head. "They once served the temple of Amun-Ra, Chief Lector, but do not worry. Because of my ancestry, I can control them. I thought it fitting, using creatures of the sun god to destroy those who would wake him."

Desjardins released the snake, which spouted fire and flew away.

"And the demons?" Desjardins asked. "Since when do we use creatures of Chaos?"

"They are well controlled, my lord." Menshikov's voice sounded strained, as if he were growing tired of humoring his boss. "These mages know the proper binding spells. I handpicked them from nomes around the world. They have great skill."

The Chief Lector focused on an Asian man in blue robes. "Kwai, isn't it?"

The man nodded.

"As I recall," Desjardins said, "you were exiled to the Three-Hundredth Nome in North Korea for murdering a fellow magician. And you, Sarah Jacobi"—he pointed to a woman with white robes and spiky black hair—"you were sent to Antarctica for causing the tsunami in the Indian Ocean."

Menshikov cleared his throat. "My lord, many of these magicians have had issues in the past, but —"

"They are ruthless murderers and thieves," Desjardins said. "The worst of our House."

"But they are anxious to prove their loyalty," Menshikov assured him. "They are happy to do it!"

He grinned at his minions, as if encouraging them to look happy. None of them did.

"Besides, my lord," Menshikov continued quickly, "if you want Brooklyn House destroyed, we must be ruthless. It is for the good of Ma'at."

Desjardins frowned. "And you, Vladimir? Will you lead them?"

"No, my lord. I have full confidence that this, ah, fine group can deal with Brooklyn on their own. They will attack at sunset. As for me, I will follow the Kanes into the Duat and deal with them

personally. You, my lord, should stay here and rest. I will send a scryer to your quarters so you may observe our progress."

"'Stay here,'" Desjardins quoted bitterly. "'And observe.'"

Menshikov bowed. "We will save the House of Life. I swear it. The Kanes will be destroyed, the gods put back into exile. Ma'at will be restored."

I hoped Desjardins would come to his senses and call off the attack. Instead, his shoulders slumped. He turned his back on Menshikov and stared at the empty throne of the pharaoh.

"Go," he said wearily. "Get those creatures out of my sight."

Menshikov smiled. "My lord."

He turned and marched down the Hall of Ages with his personal army in tow.

Once they were gone, Desjardins held up his hand. An orb of light fluttered from the ceiling and rested on his palm.

"Bring me the Book of Overcoming Apophis," Desjardins told the light. "I must consult it."

The magic orb dipped as if bowing, then raced off.

Desjardins turned toward the purple curtain of light—the image of two figures fighting over a throne of fire.

"I will 'observe,' Vladimir," he murmured to himself. "But I will not 'stay and rest.'"

The scene faded, and my *ba* returned to my body.

18. Gambling on Doomsday Eve

FOR THE SECOND TIME THAT WEEK, I woke on a sofa in a hotel room with no idea how I'd gotten there.

The room wasn't nearly as nice as the Four Seasons Alexandria. The walls were cracked plaster. Exposed beams sagged along the ceiling. A portable fan hummed on the coffee table, but the air was as hot as a blast furnace. Afternoon light streamed through the open windows. From below came the sounds of cars honking and merchants hawking their wares in Arabic. The breeze smelled of exhaust, animal manure, and apple *sisha*—the fruity molasses scent of water-pipe smoke. In other words, I knew we must be in Cairo.

At the window, Sadie, Bes, Walt, and Zia were sitting around a table, playing a board game like old friends. The scene was so bizarre, I thought I must still be dreaming.

Then Sadie noticed I was awake. "Well, well. Next time you take an extended *ba* trip, Carter, do let us know in advance. It's not fun carrying you up three flights of stairs."

I rubbed my throbbing head. "How long was I out?"

"Longer than me," Zia said.

She looked amazing—calm and rested. Her freshly washed hair was swept behind her ears, and she wore a new white sleeveless dress that made her bronze skin glow.

I guess I was staring at her pretty hard, because she dropped her gaze. Her throat turned red.

"It's three in the afternoon," she said. "I've been up since ten this morning."

"You look—"

"Better?" She raised her eyebrows, like she was challenging me to deny it. "You missed the excitement. I tried to fight. I tried to escape. This is our third hotel room."

"The first one caught fire," Bes said.

"The second one exploded," Walt said.

"I *said* I was sorry." Zia frowned. "At any rate, your sister finally calmed me down."

"Which took several hours," Sadie said, "and all my diplomatic skill."

"You have diplomatic skill?" I asked.

Sadie rolled her eyes. "As if you'd notice, Carter!"

"Your sister is quite intelligent," Zia said. "She convinced me to reserve judgment on your plans until you woke up and we could talk. She's quite persuasive."

"Thank you," Sadie said smugly.

I stared at them both, and a feeling of terror set in. "You're getting along? You *can't* get along!

You and Sadie can't stand each other."

"That was a *shabti,* Carter," Zia said, though her neck was still bright red. "I find Sadie… admirable."

"You see?" Sadie said. "I'm admirable!"

"This is a nightmare." I sat up and the blankets fell away. I looked down and found I was wearing Pokémon pajamas.

"Sadie," I said, "I'm going to kill you."

She batted her eyes innocently. "But the street merchant gave us a very good deal on those. Walt said they would fit you."

Walt raised his hands. "Don't blame me, man. I tried to stick up for you."

Bes snorted, then did a pretty good imitation of Walt's voice: "'At least get the extra-large ones with Pikachu.' Carter, your stuff's in the bathroom. Now, are we playing senet, or not?"

I stumbled into the bathroom and was relieved to find a set of normal clothes waiting for me—fresh underwear, jeans, and a T-shirt that did not feature Pikachu. The shower made a sound like a dying elephant when I tried to turn it on, but I managed to run some rusty-smelling water in the sink and wash up as best I could.

When I came out again, I didn't exactly feel good as new, but at least I didn't smell like dead fish and goat meat.

My four companions were still playing senet. I'd heard of the game—supposedly one of the oldest in the world—but I'd never seen it played. The board was a rectangle with blue-and-white-checkered squares, three rows of ten spaces each. The game pieces were white and blue circles. Instead of dice, you threw four strips of ivory like Popsicle sticks, blank on one side and marked with hieroglyphs on the other.

"I thought the rules of this game were lost," I said.

Bes raised an eyebrow. "Maybe to you mortals. The gods never forgot."

"It's quite easy," Sadie said. "You make an S around the board. First team to get all their pieces to the end wins."

"Ha!" Bes said. "There's much more to it than that. It takes years to master."

"Is that so, dwarf god?" Zia tossed the four sticks, and all of them came up marked. "Master that!"

Sadie and Zia gave each other a high five. Apparently, they were a team. Sadie moved a blue piece and bumped a white piece back to start.

"Walt," Bes grumbled, "I told you not to move that piece!"

"It isn't my fault!"

Sadie smiled at me. "It's girls versus boys. We're playing for Vlad Menshikov's sunglasses."

She held up the broken white shades that Set had given her in St. Petersburg.

"The world is about to end," I said, "and you're gambling over sunglasses?"

"Hey, man," Walt said. "We're totally multitasking. We've been talking for like, six hours, but we had to wait for you to wake up to make any decisions, right?"

"Besides," Sadie said, "Bes assures us that you cannot play senet without gambling. It would

shake the foundations of Ma'at."

"That's true," said the dwarf. "Walt, roll, already."

Walt threw the sticks and three came up blank.

Bes cursed. "We need a two to move out of the House of Re-Atoum, kid. Did I not explain that?"

"Sorry!"

I wasn't sure what else to do, so I pulled up a chair.

The view out the window was better than I'd realized. About a mile away, the Pyramids of Giza gleamed red in the afternoon light. We must've been in the southwest outskirts of the city—near El Mansoria. I'd been through this neighborhood a dozen times with my dad on our way to various dig sites, but it was still disorienting to see the pyramids so close.

I had a million questions. I needed to tell my friends about my *ba* vision. But before I could get up the nerve, Sadie launched into a long explanation of what they'd been up to while I was unconscious. Mostly she concentrated on how funny I looked when I slept, and the various whimpering noises I'd made as they pulled me out of the first two burning hotel rooms. She described the excellent fresh-baked flat bread, falafel, and spiced beef they'd had for lunch ("Oh, sorry, we didn't save you any.") and the great deals they'd gotten shopping in the *souk,* the local open-air market.

"You went shopping?" I said.

"Well, of course," she said. "We can't do anything until sunset, anyway. Bes said so."

"What do you mean?"

Bes tossed the sticks and moved one of his pieces to the home space. "The equinox, kid. We're close enough now—all the portals in the world will shut down except for two times: sunset and sunrise, when night and day are perfectly balanced."

"At any rate," Sadie said, "if we want to find Ra, we'll have to follow his journey, which means going into the Duat at sunset and coming back out at sunrise."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

She pulled a scroll from her bag—a cylinder of papyrus much thicker than the ones we'd collected. The edges glowed like fire.

"The Book of Ra," she said. "I put it together. You may thank me now."

My head started to spin. I remembered what Horus had said in my vision about the scroll burning Menshikov's face. "You mean you read it without…without any trouble?"

She shrugged. "Just the introduction: warnings, instructions, that sort of thing. I won't read the actual spell until we find Ra, but I know where we're going."

"If we decide to go," I said.

That got everyone's attention.

"If?" Zia asked. She was so close it was painful, but I could feel the distance she was putting between us: leaning away from me, tensing her shoulders, warning me to respect her space. "Sadie told me you were quite determined."

"I was," I said, "until I learned what Menshikov is planning."

I told them what I'd seen in my vision—about Menshikov's strike force heading to Brooklyn at

sunset, and his plans to track us personally through the Duat. I explained what Horus said about the dangers of waking Ra, and how I could use the crook and flail instead to fight Apophis.

"But those symbols are sacred to Ra," Zia said.

"They belong to any pharaoh who is strong enough to wield them," I said. "If we don't help Amos in Brooklyn—"

"Your uncle and all your friends will be destroyed," Bes said. "From what you've described, Menshikov has put together a nasty little army. *Uraei*—the flaming snakes—they're *very* bad news. Even if Bast gets back in time to help—"

"We need to let Amos know," Walt said. "At least warn him."

"You have a scrying bowl?" I asked.

"Better." He pulled out a cell phone. "What do I tell him? Are we going back?"

I wavered. How could I leave Amos and my friends alone against an evil army? Part of me was itching to take up the pharaoh's weapons and smash our enemies. Horus's voice was still inside me, urging me to take charge.

"Carter, you can't go to Brooklyn." Zia meet my eyes, and I realized the fear and panic hadn't left her. She was holding those feelings back, but they were still bubbling under the surface. "What I saw at Red Sands…that disturbed me too much."

I felt like she'd just stomped on my heart. "Look, I'm sorry about the avatar thing, the crook and flail. I didn't mean to freak you out, but—"

"Carter, y*ou* didn't disturb me. Vlad Menshikov did."

"Oh… Right."

She took a shaky breath. "I never trusted that man. When I graduated from initiate training, Menshikov requested I be assigned to his nome. Thankfully, Iskandar declined."

"So…why can't I go to Brooklyn?"

Zia examined the senet board as if it were a war map. "I believe you're telling the truth. Menshikov is a traitor. What you described in your vision…I think Desjardins is being affected by evil magic. It's not Ma'at's failing that's draining his life force."

"It's Menshikov," Sadie guessed.

"I believe so…." Zia's voice became hoarse. "And I believe my old mentor, Iskandar, *was* trying to protect me when he put me into that tomb. It was not a mistake that he let me hear the voice of Apophis in my dreams. It was some sort of warning—one last lesson. He hid the crook and flail with me for a reason. Perhaps he knew you would find me. At any rate, Menshikov must be stopped."

"But you just said I couldn't go to Brooklyn," I protested.

"I meant that you can't abandon your quest. I think Iskandar foresaw this path. He believed the gods must unite with the House of Life, and I trust his judgment. You *have* to awaken Ra."

Hearing Zia say it, I felt for the first time like our quest was real. And crucial. And very, very crazy. But I also felt a little spark of hope. Maybe she didn't hate me completely.

Sadie picked up the senet sticks. "Well, that's sorted, then. At sunset, we'll open a portal at the top of the Great Pyramid. We'll follow the sun boat's old course down the River of Night, find Ra, wake him, and bring him out again at dawn. And possibly find someplace for dinner along the way, because I'm hungry again."

"It'll be dangerous," Bes said. "Reckless. Probably fatal."

"So, an average day for us," I summed up.

Walt frowned, still holding his phone. "Then what should I tell Amos? He's on his own?"

"Not quite," Zia said. "I'll go to Brooklyn."

I almost choked. *"You?"*

Zia gave me a cross look. "I *am* good at magic, Carter."

"That's not what I meant. It's just—"

"I want to speak with Amos myself," she said. "When the House of Life appears, perhaps I can intervene, stall for time. I have some influence with other magicians…at least I did when Iskandar was alive. Some of them might listen to reason, especially if Menshikov isn't there egging them on."

I thought about the angry mob I'd seen in my vision. *Reasonable* wasn't the first word that came to mind.

Apparently Walt was thinking the same thing.

"If you teleport in at sunset," he said, "you'll arrive at the same time as the attackers. It's going to be chaos, not much time for talking. What if you have to fight?"

"Let's hope," Zia said, "it doesn't come to that."

Not a very reassuring answer, but Walt nodded. "I'll go with you."

Sadie dropped her senet sticks on the floor. "What? Walt, no! In your condition—"

She clamped her mouth shut, too late.

"What condition?" I asked.

If Walt had had an Evil Eye spell, I think he would've used it on my sister just then.

"My family history," he said. "Something I told Sadie…*in confidence*."

He didn't sound happy about it, but he explained the curse on his family, the bloodline of Akhenaton, and what it meant for him.

I just sat there, stunned. Walt's secretive behavior, his talks with Jaz, his moodiness—all of it made sense now. My own problems suddenly seemed a lot less significant.

"Oh, man," I mumbled. "Walt—"

"Look, Carter, whatever you're going to say, I appreciate the sentiment. But I'm through with sympathy. I've been living with this disease for years. I don't want people pitying me or treating me as though I'm special. I want to help you guys. I'll take Zia back to Brooklyn. That way, Amos will know she comes in peace. We'll try to stall the attack, hold them off until sunrise so you can come back with Ra. Besides…" He shrugged. "If you fail, and we don't stop Apophis, we're all going to die tomorrow anyway."

"That's looking on the bright side," I said. Then something occurred to me: a thought so jarring it was like a tiny nuclear reaction in my head. "Hold up. Menshikov said he was descended from the priests of Amun-Ra."

Bes snorted disdainfully. "Hated those guys. They were *so* full of themselves. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"Weren't those the same priests that fought Akhenaton and cursed Walt's ancestors?" I asked. "What if Menshikov has the secret of the curse? What if he could cure—"

"Stop." The anger in Walt's voice took me by surprise. His hands were shaking. "Carter, I've come to terms with my fate. I *won't* get my hopes up for nothing. Menshikov is the enemy. Even if he could help, he wouldn't. If you cross paths with him, don't try to make any deals. Don't try to reason with him. Do what you need to. Take him down."

I glanced at Sadie. Her eyes were gleaming, like I'd finally done something right.

"Okay, Walt," I said. "I won't mention it again."

But Sadie and I had a very different silent conversation. For once, we were in total agreement. We were going to visit the Duat. And while we were there, we'd turn the tables on Vlad Menshikov. We'd find him, beat the crud out of him, and force him to tell us how to cure Walt. Suddenly, I felt a whole lot better about this quest.

"So we'll leave at sunset," Zia said. "Walt and I for Brooklyn. You and Sadie for the Duat. It's settled."

"Except for one thing." Bes glared at the senet sticks Sadie had dropped on the floor. "You did *not* roll that. It's impossible!"

Sadie looked down. A grin spread across her face. She'd accidentally rolled a three, just what she needed to win.

She moved her last piece home, then picked up Menshikov's white glasses and tried them on. They looked creepy on her. I couldn't help thinking about Menshikov's burned voice and his scarred eyes, and what might happen to my sister if she tried to read the Book of Ra.

"Impossible is my specialty," she said. "Come on, brother, dear. Let's get ready for the Great Pyramid."

If you ever visit the pyramids, here's a tip: the best place to see them is from far away, like the horizon. The closer you get, the more disappointed you'll be.

That may sound harsh, but first of all, up close, the pyramids are going to seem smaller than you thought. Everybody who sees them says that. Sure, they were the tallest structures on the earth for thousands of years, but compared to modern buildings, they don't seem so impressive. They've been stripped of the white casing stones and golden capstones that made them really cool in ancient times. They're still beautiful, especially when they're lit up at sunset, but you can appreciate them better from far away without getting caught in the tourist scene.

That's the second thing: the mobs of tourists and vendors. I don't care where you go on vacation: Times Square, Piccadilly Circus, or the Roman Coliseum. It's always the same, with vendors selling cheap T-shirts and trinkets, and hordes of sweating tourists complaining and shuffling around trying to take pictures. The pyramids are no different, except the crowds are bigger and the vendors are really, really pushy. They know a lot of English words, but "no" isn't one of them.

As we pressed through the crowds, the vendors tried to sell us three camel rides, a dozen T-shirts, more amulets than Walt was wearing (*Special price! Good magic!*), and eleven genuine mummy fingers, which I figured were probably made in China.

I asked Bes if he could scare away the mob, but he just laughed. "Not worth it, kid. Tourists have been here almost as long as the pyramids. I'll make sure they don't notice us. Let's just get to the top."

Security guards patrolled the base of the Great Pyramid, but no one tried to stop us. Maybe Bes made us invisible somehow, or maybe the guards just chose to ignore us because we were with the

dwarf god. Either way, I soon found out why climbing the pyramids wasn't allowed: it's hard and dangerous. The Great Pyramid is about four hundred and fifty feet tall. The stone sides were never meant for climbing. As we ascended, I almost fell twice. Walt twisted his ankle. Some of the blocks were loose and crumbling. Some of the "steps" were five feet tall, and we had to hoist one another up. Finally, after twenty minutes of sweaty, difficult work, we reached the top. The smog over Cairo made everything to the east a big fuzzy smudge, but to the west we had a good view of the sun going down on the horizon, turning the desert crimson.

I tried to imagine what the view would've looked like from here roughly five thousand years ago, when the pyramid was newly built. Had the pharaoh Khufu stood up here at the top of his own tomb and admired his empire? Probably not. He'd probably been too smart to make that climb.

"Right." Sadie plopped her bag on the nearest block of limestone. "Bes, keep an eye out. Walt, help me with the portal, will you?"

Zia touched my arm, which made me jump.

"Can we talk?" she asked.

She climbed a little way down the pyramid. My pulse was racing, but I managed to follow without tripping and looking like an idiot.

Zia stared out over the desert. Her face was flushed in the light of the sunset. "Carter, don't misunderstand. I appreciate your waking me. I know your heart was in the right place."

My heart didn't feel in the right place. It felt like it was stuck in my esophagus. "But…?" I asked.

She hugged her arms. "I need time. This is very strange for me. Maybe we can be…closer some day, but for now—"

"You need time," I said, my voice ragged. "Assuming we don't all die tonight."

Her eyes were luminous gold. I wondered if that was the last color a bug saw when it was trapped in amber—and if the bug thought, *Wow, that's beautiful,* right before it was frozen forever.

"I'll do my best to protect your home," she said. "Promise me, if it comes to a choice, that you'll listen to your own heart, not the will of the gods."

"I promise," I said, though I doubted myself. I still heard Horus in my head, urging me to claim the weapons of the pharaoh. I wanted to say more, to tell her how I felt, but all I could get out was "*Um* …yeah."

Zia managed a dry smile. "Sadie's right. You are…how did she put it? Endearingly clumsy."

"Awesome. Thanks."

A light flashed above us, and a portal opened at the tip of the pyramid. Unlike most portals, this wasn't swirling sand. It glowed with purple light—a doorway straight into the Duat.

Sadie turned toward me. "This one's for us. Coming?"

"Be careful," Zia said.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm not so good at that, but—yeah."

As I trudged to the top, Sadie pulled Walt close and whispered something in his ear.

He nodded grimly. "I will."

Before I could ask what that was about, Sadie looked at Bes. "Ready?"

"I'll follow you," Bes promised. "As soon as I get Walt and Zia through their portal. I'll meet

you on the River of Night, in the Fourth House."

"The fourth what?" I asked.

"You'll see," he promised. "Now, go!"

I took one more look at Zia, wondering if this would be the last time I saw her. Then Sadie and I jumped into the churning purple doorway.

The Duat is a strange place.

[Sadie just called me Captain Obvious—but, hey, it's worth saying.]

The currents of the spirit world interact with your thoughts, pulling you here and there, shaping what you see to fit with what you know. So even though we had stepped into another level of reality, it looked like the quayside of the River Thames below Gran and Gramps's flat.

"This is rude," Sadie said.

I understood what she meant. It was hard for her to be back in London after her disastrous birthday trip. Also, last Christmas, we'd started our first journey to Brooklyn here. We'd walked down these steps to the docks with Amos and boarded his magic boat. At the time, I was grieving the loss of my dad, in shock that Gran and Gramps would give us up to an uncle I didn't even remember, and terrified of sailing into the unknown. Now, all those feelings welled up inside me, as sharp and painful as ever.

The river was shrouded with mist. There were no city lights, just an eerie glow in the sky. The skyline of London seemed fluid—buildings shifting around, rising and melting as if they couldn't find a comfortable place to settle.

Below us, the mist drifted away from the docks.

"Sadie," I said, "Look."

At the bottom of the steps, a boat was moored, but it wasn't Amos's. It was the barque of the sun god, just like I'd seen in my vision—a once regal ship with a deckhouse and places for twenty oarsmen—but it was now barely able to stay afloat. The sail was tattered, the oars broken, the rigging covered with cobwebs.

Halfway down the steps, blocking our path, stood Gran and Gramps.

"Them again," Sadie growled. "Come on."

She marched straight down the steps until we stood face-to-face with the glowing images of our grandparents.

"Shove off," Sadie told them.

"My dear." Gran's eyes glittered. "Is that any way to address your grandmother?"

"Oh, pardon me," said Sadie. "This must be the part where I say 'My, what big teeth you have.' You're not my grandmother, Nekhbet! Now, get out of our way!"

The image of Gran shimmered. Her flowery housecoat turned into a cloak of greasy black feathers. Her face shriveled into a saggy wrinkled mask, and most of her hair fell out, which put her at a 9.5 on the Ugly meter, right up there with Bes.

"Show more respect, love," the goddess cooed. "We're only here to give you a friendly warning. You're about to pass the Point of No Return. If you step on that boat, there will be no turning back—no stopping until you've passed through all Twelve Houses of the Night, or until you die."

Gramps barked, *"Aghh!"*

He scratched his armpits, which might've meant he was possessed by the baboon god Babi—or not, since this behavior wasn't too strange for Gramps.

"Listen to Babi," Nekhbet urged. "You have no idea what awaits you on the river. You could barely fend off the two of us in London, girl. The armies of Chaos are much worse!"

"She's not alone this time." I stepped forward with the crook and flail. "Now, get lost."

Gramps snarled and backed away.

Nekhbet's eyes narrowed. "You would wield the pharaoh's weapons?" Her tone held a hint of grudging admiration. "A bold move, child, but that will not save you."

"You don't get it," I said. "We're saving *you* too. We're saving *all* of us from Apophis. When we come back with Ra, you're going to help. You're going to follow our orders, and you're going to convince the other gods to do the same."

"Ridiculous," Nekhbet hissed.

I raised the crook, and power flowed through me—the power of a king. The crook was the tool of a shepherd. A king leads his people like a shepherd leads his flock. I exerted my will, and the two gods crumpled to their knees.

The images of Nekhbet and Gramps evaporated, revealing the gods' true forms. Nekhbet was a massive vulture with a golden crown on her head and an elaborate jeweled collar around her neck. Her wings were still black and greasy, but they glistened as if she'd been rolling in gold dust. Babi was a giant gray baboon with fiery red eyes, scimitar fangs, and arms as thick as tree trunks.

They both glared at me with pure hatred. I knew if I wavered even for a moment, if I let the power of the crook falter, they would tear me apart.

"Swear loyalty," I commanded. "When we return with Ra, you will obey him."

"You'll never succeed," Nekhbet said.

"Then it won't do any harm to pledge your loyalty," I said. "Swear it!"

I raised the war flail, and the gods cringed.

"Agh," Babi muttered.

"We swear," Nekhbet said. "But it is an empty promise. You sail to your death."

I slashed my crook through the air, and the gods vanished into the mist.

Sadie took a deep breath. "Well done. You sounded confident."

"A complete act."

"I know," she said. "Now the hard part: finding Ra and waking him up. And having a nice dinner along the way, preferably. Without dying."

I looked down at the boat. Thoth, the god of knowledge, had once told us that we'd always have the power to summon a boat when we needed one, because we were the blood of the pharaohs. But I'd never thought it would be *this* boat, and in such bad shape. Two kids in a broken-down leaky barge, alone against the forces of Chaos.

"All aboard," I told Sadie.

SADIE

19. The Revenge of Bullwinkle the Moose God

I SHOULD MENTION THAT Carter was wearing a skirt.

[Ha! You are *not* grabbing the microphone. It's my turn.]

He neglected to tell you that, but as soon as we entered the Duat, our appearances changed, and we found ourselves wearing Ancient Egyptian clothes.

They looked quite good on me. My white silk gown shimmered. My arms were bedecked with gold rings and bracelets. True, the jeweled neck collar was a bit heavy, like one of those lead aprons you might wear for an X ray at the dentist's, and my hair was plaited with enough hairspray to petrify a major god. But otherwise I'm sure I looked rather alluring.

Carter, on the other hand, was dressed in a man-skirt—a simple linen wrap, with his crook and flail hanging from a utility-belt sort of thing around his waist. His chest was bare except for a golden neck collar, like mine. His eyes were lined with kohl, and he wore no shoes.

To Ancient Egyptians, I'm sure he would've looked regal and warlike, a fine specimen of manhood. [You see? I managed to say that without laughing.] And I suppose Carter wasn't the worst-looking guy with his shirt off, but that didn't mean I wanted to adventure through the underworld with a brother who was wearing nothing but jewelry and a beach towel.

As we stepped onto the sun god's boat, Carter immediately got a splinter in his foot.

"Why are you barefooted?" I demanded.

"It wasn't *my* idea!" He winced as he plucked a toothpick-size piece of deck from between his toes. "I guess because ancient warriors fought barefoot. Sandals got too slippery from sweat and blood, and all."

"And the skirt?"

"Let's just go, all right?"

That proved easier said than done.

The boat drifted away from the docks, then got stuck in a backwater a few meters downstream. We began turning in circles.

"Tiny question," I said. "Do you know anything about boats?"

"Nothing," Carter admitted.

Our tattered sail was about as useful as a ripped tissue. The oars were either broken or trailing uselessly in the water, and they looked quite heavy. I didn't see how the two of us could row a boat meant for a crew of twenty, even *if* the river stayed calm. On our last trip through the Duat, the ride

had been more like a roller coaster.

"What about those glowing balls of light?" I asked. "Like the crew we had on the *Egyptian Queen*?"

"Can you summon some?"

"Right," I grumbled. "Throw the hard questions back to me."

I looked around the boat, hoping to spot a button that read: PUSH HERE FOR GLOWING SAILORS! I saw nothing so helpful. I knew the sun god's barque once had had a crew of lights. I'd seen them in my vision. But how to summon them?

The tent pavilion was empty. The throne of fire was gone. The boat was silent except for water gurgling through the cracks in the hull. The spinning of the ship was starting to make me sick.

Then a horrible feeling crept over me. A dozen tiny voices whispered at the base of my skull: *Isis. Schemer. Poisoner. Traitor.*

I realized my nausea wasn't just from the spiraling current. The entire ship was sending malicious thoughts my way. The boards under my feet, the railing, the oars and rigging—every part of the sun god's barque hated my presence.

"Carter, the boat doesn't like me," I announced.

"You're saying the boat has good taste?"

"Ha-ha. I mean, it senses Isis. She poisoned Ra and forced him into exile, after all. This boat remembers."

"Well…apologize, or something."

"Hullo, boat," I said, feeling quite foolish. "Sorry about the poisoning business. But you see—I'm not Isis. I'm Sadie Kane."

Traitor, the voices whispered.

"I can see why you'd think so," I admitted. "I probably have that 'Isis magic' smell to me, don't I? But honestly, I sent Isis packing. She doesn't live here anymore. My brother and I are going to bring back Ra."

The boat shuddered. The dozen little voices fell silent, as if for the first time in their immortal lives they were truly and properly stunned. (Well, they hadn't met *me* yet, had they?)

"That would be good, yes?" I ventured. "Ra back, just like old times, rolling on the river, and so on? We're here to make things right, but to do that we need to journey through the Houses of the Night. If you could just cooperate—"

A dozen glowing orbs blazed to life. They circled me like an angry swarm of flaming tennis balls, their heat so intense, I thought they'd combust my new dress.

"Sadie," Carter warned. "They don't look happy."

And he wonders why I called him Captain Obvious.

I tried to remain calm.

"Behave," I told the lights sternly. "This isn't for me. It's for Ra. If you want your pharaoh back, you'll man your stations."

I thought I'd be roasted like a tandoori chicken, but I stood my ground. Since I was surrounded, I really I had no choice. I exerted my magic and tried to bend the lights to my will—the way I might

have done to turn someone into a rat or a lizard.

You will be helpful, I ordered. *You will do your work obediently.*

There was a collective hiss inside my head, which either meant I'd blown a brain gasket, or the lights were relenting.

The crew scattered. They took up their stations, hauling lines, mending the sail, manning the unbroken oars, and guiding the tiller.

The leaky hull groaned as the boat turned its nose downstream.

Carter exhaled. "Good job. You okay?"

I nodded, but my head felt like it was still spinning in circles. I wasn't sure if I'd convinced the orbs, or if they were simply biding their time, waiting for revenge. Either way, I wasn't thrilled to have put our fate in their hands.

We sailed into the dark. The cityscape of London melted away. My stomach got that familiar free-fall sensation as we passed deeper into the Duat.

"We're entering the Second House," I guessed.

Carter grabbed the mast to steady himself. "You mean the Houses of the Night, like Bes mentioned? What are they, anyway?"

It felt strange to be explaining Egyptian myths to Carter. I thought he might be teasing me, but he seemed genuinely perplexed.

"Something I read in the Book of Ra," I said. "Each hour of the night is a 'House.' We have to pass through the twelve stages of the river, representing twelve hours of the night."

Carter peered into the darkness ahead of us. "So if we're in the Second House, you mean an hour has already passed? It didn't feel that long."

He was right. It didn't. Then again, I had no idea how time flowed in the Duat. One House of the Night might not correspond exactly to one mortal hour in the world above.

Anubis once told me he'd been in the Land of the Dead for five thousand years, but he still felt like a teenager, as if no time had passed.

I shuddered. What if we popped out on the other side of the River of Night and found that several eons had passed? I'd just turned thirteen. I wasn't ready to be thirteen hundred.

I also wished I hadn't thought of Anubis. I touched the *shen* amulet on my necklace. After all that had happened with Walt, the idea of seeing Anubis made me feel strangely guilty, but also a bit excited. Perhaps Anubis would help us on our journey. Perhaps he'd whisk me away to some private spot for a chat as he had last time we'd visited the Duat—a romantic little graveyard, dinner for two at the Coffin Café…

Snap out of it, Sadie, I thought. *Concentrate.*

I pulled the Book of Ra from my bag and scanned the instructions again. I'd read them several times already, but they were cryptic and confusing—much like a maths textbook. The scroll was chock-full of terms like "first from Chaos," "breath into clay," "the night's flock" "reborn in fire," "the acres of the sun," "the kiss of the knife," "the gambler of light," and "the last scarab"—most of which made no sense to me.

I gathered that as we passed through the twelve stages of the river, I'd have to read the three sections of the Book of Ra at three separate locations, probably to revive the different aspects of the

sun god, and each of three aspects would present us with some sort of challenge. I knew that if I failed—if I so much as stumbled over one word while reading the spells—I would end up worse than Vlad Menshikov. The idea terrified me, but I couldn't dwell on the possibility of failure. I simply had to hope that when the time came, the scroll's gibberish would make sense.

The current accelerated. So did the leaking of the boat. Carter demonstrated his combat magic skill by summoning a bucket and bailing out water, while I concentrated on keeping the crew in line. The deeper we sailed into the Duat, the more rebellious the glowing orbs became. They chafed against my will, remembering how much they wanted to incinerate me.

It's unnerving to float down a magic river with voices whispering in your head: *Die, traitor, die.* Every so often I'd get the feeling we were being followed. I'd turn and think I could see a whitish smudge against the black, like the afterimage of a flash, but I decided it must be my imagination. Even more unnerving was the darkness ahead—no shoreline, no landmarks, no visibility at all. The crew could've steered us straight into a boulder or the mouth of a monster, and we would've had absolutely no warning. We just kept sailing through the dark empty void.

"Why is it so…nothing?" I murmured.

Carter emptied his bucket. He made an odd sight—a boy dressed as a pharaoh with the royal crook and flail, bailing water from a leaky boat.

"Maybe the Houses of the Night follow human sleep patterns," he suggested.

"Human what?"

"Sleep patterns. Mom used to tell us about them before bedtime. Remember?"

I didn't. Then again, I'd only been six when our mum died. She'd been a scientist as well as a magician, and had thought nothing of reading us Newton's laws or the periodic table as bedtime stories. Most of it had gone over my head, but I *wanted* to remember. I'd always been irritated that Carter remembered Mum so much better than I did.

"Sleep has different stages," Carter said. "Like, the first few hours, the brain is almost in a coma—a really deep sleep with hardly any dreams. Maybe that's why this part of the river is so dark and formless. Then later in the night, the brain goes through R.E.M.—rapid eye movement. That's when dreams happen. The cycles get more rapid and more vivid. Maybe the Houses of the Night follow a pattern like that."

It seemed a bit far-fetched to me. Then again, Mum had always told us science and magic weren't mutually exclusive. She'd called them two dialects of the same language. Bast had once told us there were millions of different channels and tributaries to the Duat's river. The geography could change with each journey, responding to the traveler's thoughts. If the river was shaped by *all* the sleeping minds in the world, if its course got more vivid and crazy as the night went along, then we were in for a rough ride.

The river eventually narrowed. A shoreline appeared on either side—black volcanic sand sparkling in the lights of our magic crew. The air turned colder. The underside of the boat scraped against rocks and sandbars, which made the leaks worse. Carter gave up on the pail and pulled wax from his supply bag. Together we tried to plug the leaks, speaking binding spells to hold the boat together. If I'd had any chewing gum, I would've used that as well.

We didn't pass any signposts—NOW ENTERING THE THIRD HOUSE, SERVICES NEXT EXIT—but we'd clearly entered a different section of the river. Time was slipping away at an alarming rate, and still

we hadn't *done* anything.

"Perhaps the first challenge is boredom," I said. "When will something happen?"

I should've known better than to say that aloud. Right in front of us, a shape loomed out of the darkness. A sandaled foot the size of a water bed planted itself on the prow of our ship and stopped us dead in the water.

It wasn't an attractive foot, either. Definitely male. Its toes were splattered with mud, and its toenails were yellow, cracked, and overgrown. The leather sandal straps were covered in lichen and barnacles. In short, the foot looked and smelled very much like it had been standing on the same rock in the middle of the river, wearing the same sandal, for several thousand years.

Unfortunately, it was attached to a leg, which was attached to a body. The giant leaned down to look at us.

"You are bored?" his voice boomed, not in an unfriendly way. "I could kill you, if that would help."

He wore a kilt like Carter's, except that the giant's skirt could have supplied enough fabric to make ten ship sails. His body was humanoid and muscular, covered with man-fur—the sort of gross body hair that makes me want to start a charity waxing foundation for overly fuzzy men. He had the head of a ram: a white snout with a brass ring in his nose and long curly horns hung with dozens of bronze bells. His eyes were set far apart, with luminous red irises and vertical slits for pupils. I suppose that all sounds rather frightening, but the ram man didn't strike me as devilish. In fact he looked quite familiar, for some reason. He seemed more melancholy than threatening, as if he'd been standing on his little rock island in the middle of the river for so long, he'd forgotten why he was there.

[Carter asks when I became a ram whisperer. Do shut up, Carter.]

I honestly felt sorry for the ram man. His eyes were full of loneliness. I couldn't believe he would hurt us—until he drew from his belt two very large knives with curly blades like his horns.

"You're silent," he noted. "Is that a yes for the killing?"

"No, thanks!" I said, trying to sound grateful for the offer. "One word and one question, please. The word is *pedicure*. The question is: Who are you?"

"Ahhh-ha-ha-ha," he said, bleating like a sheep. "If you knew my name, we wouldn't need introductions, and I could let you pass. Unfortunately, no one ever knows my name. A shame, too. I see you've found the Book of Ra. You've revived his crew and managed to sail his boat to the gates of the Fourth House. No one's ever gotten this far before. I'm terribly sorry I have to slice you to pieces."

He hefted his knives, one in each hand. Our glowing orbs swarmed in a frenzy, whispering, *Yes! Slice her! Yes!*

"Just a mo'," I called up to the giant. "If we name you, we can pass?"

"Naturally." He sighed. "But no one ever can."

I glanced at Carter. This wasn't the first time we'd been stopped on the River of Night and challenged to name a guardian on pain of death. Apparently, it was quite a common experience for Egyptian souls and magicians passing through the Duat. But I couldn't believe we'd get such an easy test. I was sure now that I recognized the ram man. We'd seen his statue in the Brooklyn Museum.

"It's him, isn't it?" I asked Carter. "The chap who looks like Bullwinkle?"

"Don't call him Bullwinkle!" Carter hissed. He looked up at the giant ram man and said, "You're Khnum, aren't you?"

The ram man made a rumbling sound deep in his throat. He scraped one of his knives against the ship's rail. "Is that a question? Or is that your final answer?"

Carter blinked. *"Um—"*

"Not our final answer!" I yelped, realizing that we'd almost stepped into a trap. "Not even close. Khnum is your common name, isn't it? You want us to say your true name, your *ren*."

Khnum tilted his head, the bells on his horns jingling. "That would be nice. But, alas, no one knows it. Even I have forgotten it."

"How can you forget your own name?" Carter asked. "And, yes, that's a question."

"I am part of Ra," said the ram god. "I am his aspect in the underworld—a third of his personality. But when Ra stopped making his nightly journey, he no longer needed me. He left me here at the gates of the Fourth House, discarded like an old coat. Now I guard the gates…I have no other purpose. If I could recover my name, I could yield my spirit to whoever frees me. They could reunite me with Ra, but until then I cannot leave this place."

He sounded horribly depressed, like a little lost sheep, or rather a ten-meter-tall lost sheep with very large knives. I wanted to help him. Even more than that, I wanted to find a way not to get myself sliced to bits.

"If you don't remember your name," I said, "why couldn't we just tell you any old name? How would you know whether it was the right answer or not?"

Khnum let his knives trail in the water. "I hadn't thought of that."

Carter glared at me as if to say *Why did you tell him?*

The ram god bleated. "I think I will know my *ren* when I hear it," he decided, "though I cannot be sure. Being only part of Ra, I am not sure of much. I've lost most of my memories, most of my power and identity. I am no more than a husk of my former self."

"Your former self must've been enormous," I muttered.

The god might have smiled, though it was hard to tell with the ram face. "I'm sorry you don't have my *ren*. You're a bright girl. You're the first to make it this far. The first and the best." He sighed forlornly. "Ah, well. I suppose we should get to the killing."

The first and the best. My mind started racing.

"Wait," I said. "I know your name."

Carter yelped. "You do? Tell him!"

I thought of a line from the Book of Ra—*first from Chaos*. I drew on the memories of Isis, the only goddess who had ever known Ra's secret name, and I began to understand the nature of the sun god.

"Ra was the first god to rise out of Chaos," I said.

Khnum frowned. "That's my name?"

"No, just listen," I said. "You said you're not complete without Ra, just a husk of your former self. But that's true of *all* the other Egyptian gods as well. Ra is older, more powerful. He's the

original source of Ma'at, like—"

"Like the taproot of the gods," Carter volunteered.

"Right," I said. "I have no idea what a taproot is, but—right. All these eons, the other gods have been slowly fading, losing power, because Ra is missing. They might not admit it, but he's their *heart*. They're dependent on him. All this time, we've been wondering if it was worth it, to bring back Ra. We didn't know why it was so important, but now I understand."

Carter nodded, slowly warming to the idea. "Ra's the center of Ma'at. He has to come back, if the gods are going to win."

"And that's why Apophis wants to bring back Ra," I guessed. "The two are connected—Ma'at and Chaos. If Apophis can swallow Ra while the sun god is old and weak—"

"All the gods die," Carter said. "The world crumbles into Chaos."

Khnum turned his head so he could study me with one glowing red eye. "That's all quite interesting," he said. "But I'm not hearing my secret name. To wake Ra, you must first name me."

I opened the Book of Ra and took a deep breath. I began to read the first part of the spell. Now, you may be thinking, *Gosh, Sadie. Your big test was to read some words off a scroll? What's so hard about that?*

If you think that, you've clearly never read a spell. Imagine reading aloud onstage in front of a thousand hostile teachers who are waiting to give you bad marks. Imagine you can only read by looking at the backward reflection in a mirror. Imagine all the words are mixed around, and you have to put the sentences together in the right order as you go. Imagine if you make one mistake, one stumble, one mispronunciation, you'll die. Imagine doing all that at once, and you'll have some idea what it's like to cast a spell from a scroll.

Despite that, I felt strangely confident. The spell suddenly made sense.

"'I name you First from Chaos,'" I said. "'Khnum, who is Ra, the evening sun. I summon your *ba* to awaken the Great One, for I am—'"

My first near-fatal mistake: the scroll said something like *insert your name here.* And I almost read it aloud that way: "For I am insert your name here!"

Well? It would've been an honest mistake. Instead, I managed to say, "'I am Sadie Kane, restorer of the throne of fire. I name you Breath into Clay, the Ram of Night's Flock, the Divine—'"

I almost lost it again. I was sure the Egyptian title said *the Divine Pooter.* But that made no sense, unless Khnum had magic powers I didn't want to know about. Thankfully, I remembered something from the Brooklyn Museum. Khnum had been depicted as a potter sculpting a human from clay.

"'—the Divine Potter,'" I corrected myself. "'I name you Khnum, protector of the fourth gate. I return your name. I return your essence to Ra.'"

The god's huge eyes dilated. His nostrils flared. "Yes." He sheathed his knives. "Well done, my lady. You may pass into the Fourth House. But beware the fires, and be prepared for the second form of Ra. He will not be so grateful for your help."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

But the ram god's body dissolved into mist. The Book of Ra sucked in the wisps of smoke, and it rolled shut. Khnum and his island were gone. The boat drifted on into a narrower tunnel.

"Sadie," Carter said, "that was amazing."

Normally, I would've been happy to astonish him with my brilliance. But my heart was racing. My hands were sweating, and I thought I might throw up. On top of that, I could feel the glowing orb crew coming out of their shock, beginning to fight me again.

No slice, they complained. *No slice!*

Mind your own business, I thought back at them. *And keep the boat going.*

"Um, Sadie?" Carter asked. "Why is your face turning red?"

I thought he was accusing me of blushing. Then I realized he too was red. The whole boat was awash in ruby light. I turned to look ahead of us, and I made a sound in my throat not too different from Khnum's bleating.

"Oh, no," I said. "Not this place again."

Roughly a hundred meters ahead of us, the tunnel opened into a huge cavern. I recognized the massive boiling Lake of Fire; but the last time I hadn't seen it from this angle.

We were picking up speed, heading down a series of rapids like a water slide. At the end of the rapids, the water turned into a fiery waterfall and dropped straight down into the lake about half a mile below. We were hurtling toward the precipice with absolutely no way to stop.

Keep the boat going, the crew whispered with glee. *Keep the boat going!*

We probably had less than a minute, but it seemed longer. I suppose if time flies when you're having fun, it really creeps when you're hurtling toward your death.

"We've got to turn around!" Carter said. "Even if that *wasn't* fire, we'll never survive the drop!"

He began yelling at the orbs of light, "Turn around! Paddle! Mayday!"

They happily ignored him.

I stared at the flaming drop to oblivion and the Lake of Fire below. Despite the waves of heat rolling over us like dragon breath, I felt cold. I realized what needed to happen.

"'Reborn in fire,'" I said.

"What?" Carter asked.

"It's a line from the Book of Ra. We can't turn around. We have to go over—straight into the lake."

"Are you crazy? We'll burn up!"

I ripped open my magic bag and rummaged through my supplies. "We have to take the ship through the fire. That was part of the sun's nightly rebirth, right? Ra would have done it."

"Ra wasn't flammable!"

The waterfall was only twenty meters away now. My hands trembled as I poured ink into my writing palette. If you've never tried to use a calligraphy set while standing up on a boat, it isn't easy.

"What are you doing?" Carter asked. "Writing your will?"

I took a deep breath and dipped my stylus in black ink. I visualized the hieroglyphs I needed. I wished Zia were with us. Not just because we had hit it off rather well in Cairo—[Oh, stop pouting, Carter. It's not *my* fault she realized I'm the brilliant one in the family]—but because Zia was an expert with fire glyphs, and that's just what we needed.

"Push up your hair," I told Carter. "I need to paint your forehead."

"I'm not plunging to my death with loser painted on my head!"

"I'm trying to save you. Hurry!"

He pushed his hair out of the way. I painted the glyphs for *fire* and *shield* on his forehead, and immediately my brother burst into flame.

I know—it was like a dream come true and a nightmare, all at once. He danced around, spewing some very creative curse words before realizing that the fire wasn't hurting him. He was simply encased in a protective sheet of flames.

"What, exactly—" His eyes widened. "Hold on to something!"

The boat tipped sickeningly over the edge of the falls. I dashed the hieroglyphs onto the back of my hand, but it wasn't a good copy. The flames spluttered weakly around me. Alas, I didn't have time for anything better. I wrapped my arms around the rail, and we plummeted straight down.

Strange how many things can go through your mind as you fall to certain doom. From up high, the Lake of Fire looked quite beautiful, like the surface of the sun. I wondered if I would feel any pain on impact, or if we would simply evaporate. It was hard to see anything as we plummeted through the ash and smoke, but I thought I spotted a familiar island about a mile away—the black temple where I'd first met Anubis. I wondered if he could see me from there, and if he would rush to my rescue. I wondered if my chances of survival would be better if I pushed away from the boat and fell like a cliff diver, but I couldn't make myself do it. I held on to the rail with all my might. I wasn't sure if the magical fire shield was protecting me, but I was sweating fiercely, and I was fairly certain I'd left my throat and most of my internal organs at the top of the waterfall.

Finally we hit bottom with an understated *whoooooom.*

How to describe the sensation of plunging into a lake of liquid fire? Well…it burned. And yet it was somehow wet, too. I didn't dare breathe. After a moment's hesitation, I opened my eyes. All I could see were swirling red and yellow flames. We were still underwater…or under fire? I realized two things: I was not burning to death, and the boat was moving forward.

I couldn't believe my crazy protection glyphs had actually worked. As the boat slid through the swirling currents of heat, the voices of the crew whispered in my mind—more joyful than angry now.

Renew, they said. *New life. New light.*

That sounded promising until I grasped some less pleasant facts. I still couldn't breathe. My body liked breathing. Also, it was getting much hotter. I could feel my protection glyph failing, the ink burning against my hand. I reached out blindly and grabbed an arm—Carter's, I assumed. We held hands, and even though I couldn't see him, it was comforting to know he was there. Perhaps it was my imagination, but the heat seemed to lessen.

Long ago, Amos had told us that we were more powerful together. We increased each other's magic just by being in proximity. I hoped that was true now. I tried to send my thoughts to Carter, urging him to help me maintain the fire shield.

The ship sailed on through the flames. I thought we were starting to ascend, but it might have been wishful thinking. My vision began to go dark. My lungs were screaming. If I inhaled fire, I wondered if I would end up like Vlad Menshikov.

Just when I knew I would pass out, the boat surged upward, and we broke the surface.

I gasped—and not just because I needed the air. We had docked at the shoreline of the boiling lake, in front of a large limestone gateway, like the entrance to the ancient temple I'd seen at Luxor. I was still holding Carter's hand. As far as I could tell, we were both fine.

The sun boat was better than fine. It had been renewed. Its sail gleamed white, the symbol of the sun shining gold in its center. The oars were repaired and newly polished. The paint was freshly lacquered black and gold and green. The hull no longer leaked, and the tent house was once more a beautiful pavilion. There was no throne, and no Ra, but the crew glowed brightly and cheerfully as they tied off the lines to the dock.

I couldn't help it. I threw my arms around Carter and let out a sob. "Are you all right?"

He pulled away awkwardly and nodded. The glyph on his forehead had burned off.

"Thanks to you," he said. "Where—"

"Sunny Acres," said a familiar voice.

Bes came down the steps to the dock. He wore a new, even louder Hawaiian shirt and only his Speedo for pants, so I can't say he was a sight for sore eyes. Now that he was in the Duat, he fairly glowed with power. His hair had turned darker and curlier, and his face looked decades younger.

"Bes!" I said. "What took you so long? Are Walt and Zia—"

"They're fine," he said. "And I told you I'd meet you at the Fourth House." He jabbed his thumb at a sign carved into the limestone archway. "Used to be called the House of Rest. Apparently they've changed the name."

The sign was in hieroglyphs, but I had no trouble reading it.

"'Sunny Acres Assisted-Living Community,'" I read. "'Formerly the House of Rest. Under New Management.' What exactly—"

"We should get going," Bes said. "Before your stalker arrives."

"Stalker?" Carter asked.

Bes pointed to the top of the fiery waterfall, now a good half mile away. At first I didn't see anything. Then there was a streak of white against the red flames—as if a man in an ice cream suit had plunged into the lake. Apparently I hadn't imagined that white smudge in the darkness. We *were* being followed.

"Menshikov?" I said. "That's—that's—"

"Bad news," Bes said. "Now, come on. We have to find the sun god."

SADIE

20. We Visit the House of the Helpful Hippo

HOSPITALS. CLASSROOMS. Now I'll add to my list of least-favorite places: old people's homes.

That may sound odd, as I lived with my grandparents. I suppose their flat counts as an old people's home. But I mean *institutions*. Nursing homes. Those are the worst. They smell like an unholy mixture of canteen food, cleaning supplies, and pensioners. The inmates (sorry, patients) always look so miserable. And the homes have absurdly happy names, like Sunny Acres. Please.

We stepped through the limestone gateway into a large open hall—the Egyptian version of assisted living. Rows of colorfully painted columns were studded with iron sconces holding blazing torches. Potted palms and flowering hibiscus plants were placed here and there in a failed attempt to make the place feel cheerful. Large windows looked out on the Lake of Fire, which I suppose was a nice view if you enjoyed brimstone. The walls were painted with scenes of the Egyptian afterlife, along with jolly hieroglyphic mottos like *IMMORTALITY WITH SECURITY* and *LIFE STARTS AT 3000!*

Glowing servant lights and clay *shabti* in white medical uniforms bustled about, carrying trays of medication and pushing wheelchairs. The patients, however, didn't bustle much. A dozen withered figures in linen hospital gowns sat around the room, staring vacantly into space. A few wandered the room, pushing wheelie poles with IV bags. All wore bracelets with their names in hieroglyphs.

Some looked human, but many had animal heads. An old man with the head of a crane rocked back and forth in a metal folding chair, pecking at a game of senet on the coffee table. An old woman with a grizzled lioness's head scooted herself around in a wheelchair, mumbling, "Meow, meow." A shriveled blue-skinned man not much taller than Bes hugged one of the limestone columns and cried softly, as if he were afraid the column might try to leave him.

In other words, the scene was thoroughly depressing.

"What *is* this place?" I asked. "Are those all gods?"

Carter seemed just as mystified as I was. Bes looked like he was about to crawl out of his skin.

"Never actually been here," he admitted. "Heard rumors, but…" He swallowed as if he'd just eaten a spoonful of peanut butter. "Come on. Let's ask at the nurses' station."

The desk was a crescent of granite with a row of telephones (though I couldn't imagine who they'd call from the Duat), a computer, lots of clipboards, and a platter-size stone disk with a triangular fin—a sundial, which seemed strange, as there was no sun.

Behind the counter, a short, heavy woman stood with her back to us, checking a whiteboard with names and medication times. Her glossy black hair was plaited down her back like an extra-large beaver's tail, and her nurse's cap barely fit on her wide head.

We were halfway to the desk when Bes froze. “It’s her.”

“Who?” Carter asked.

“This is bad.” Bes turned pale. “I should’ve known…. Curse it! You’ll have to go without me.”

I looked more closely at the nurse, who still had her back to us. She did seem a bit imposing, with massive beefy arms, a neck thicker than my waist, and oddly tinted purplish skin. But I couldn’t understand why she bothered Bes so much.

I turned to ask him, but Bes had ducked behind the nearest potted plant. It wasn’t big enough to hide him, and certainly didn’t camouflage his Hawaiian shirt.

“Bes, stop it,” I said.

“Shhh! I’m invisible!”

Carter sighed. “We don’t have time for this. Come on, Sadie.”

He led the way to the nurses’ station.

“Excuse us,” he called across the desk.

The nurse turned, and I yelped. I tried to contain my shock, but it was difficult, as the woman was a hippopotamus.

I don’t mean that as an unflattering comparison. She was *actually* a hippo. Her long snout was shaped like an upsidedown valentine heart, with bristly whiskers, tiny nostrils, and a mouth with two large bottom teeth. Her eyes were small and beady. Her face looked quite odd framed with luxurious black hair, but it wasn’t nearly as peculiar as her body. She wore her nurse’s blouse open like a jacket, revealing a bikini top that—how to put this delicately—was trying to cover a very great deal of top with very little fabric. Her purple-pink belly was incredibly swollen, as if she were nine months pregnant.

“May I help you?” she asked. Her voice was pleasant and kindly—not what one would expect from a hippopotamus. Come to think of it, I wouldn’t expect *any* voice from a hippopotamus.

“Um, hippo—I mean, hullo!” I stammered. “My brother and I are looking for…” I glanced at Carter and found he was *not* staring at the nurse’s face. “Carter!”

“What?” He shook himself out of his trance. “Right. Sorry. Uh, aren’t you a goddess? Tawaret, or something?”

The hippo woman bared her two enormous teeth in what I hoped was a smile. “Why, how nice to be recognized! Yes, dear. I’m Tawaret. You said you were looking for someone? A relative? Are you gods?”

Behind us, the potted hibiscus rustled as Bes picked it up and tried to move it behind a column. Tawaret’s eyes widened.

“Is that Bes?” she called. “Bes!”

The dwarf stood abruptly and brushed off his shirt. His face was redder than Set’s. “Plant looks like it’s getting enough water,” he muttered. “I should check the ones over there.”

He started to walk away, but Tawaret called again, “Bes! It’s me, Tawaret! Over here!”

Bes stiffened like she’d shot him in the back. He turned with a tortured smile.

“Well…hey. Tawaret. Wow!”

She scrambled out from the behind the desk, wearing high heels that seemed inadvisable for a

pregnant water mammal. She spread her chubby arms for a hug, and Bes thrust out his hand to shake. They ended up doing an awkward sort of dance, half hug, half shake, which made one thing perfectly obvious to me.

"So, you two used to date?" I asked.

Bes shot eye-daggers at me. Tawaret blushed, which made it the first time I'd ever embarrassed a hippo.

"A long time ago…" Tawaret turned to the dwarf god. "Bes, how are you? After that horrible time at the palace, I was afraid—"

"Good!" he shouted. "Yes, thanks. Good. You're good? Good! We're here on important business, as Sadie was about to tell you."

He kicked me in the shin, which I thought quite unnecessary.

"Yes, right," I said. "We're looking for Ra, to awaken him."

If Bes had been hoping to redirect Tawaret's train of thought, the plan worked. Tawaret opened her mouth in a silent gasp, and as if I'd just suggested something horrible, like a hippo hunt.

"Awaken Ra?" she said. "Oh, dear…oh, that is unfortunate. Bes, you're helping them with this?"

"Uh-hum," he stuttered. "Just, you know—"

"Bes is doing us a favor," I said. "Our friend Bast asked him to look after us."

I could tell right away I'd made matters worse. The temperature in the air seemed to drop ten degrees.

"I see," Tawaret said. "A favor for Bast."

I wasn't sure what I'd said wrong, but I tried my best to backtrack. "Please. Look, the fate of the world is at stake It's very important we find Ra."

Tawaret crossed her arms skeptically. "Dear, he's been missing for millennia. And trying to awaken him would be terribly dangerous. Why now?"

"Tell her, Sadie." Bes inched backward as if preparing to dive into the hibiscus. "No secrets here. Tawaret can be trusted completely."

"Bes!" She perked up immediately and fluttered her eyelashes. "Do you mean that?"

"Sadie, talk!" Bes pleaded.

And so I did. I showed Tawaret the Book of Ra. I explained why we needed to wake the sun god —the threat of Apophis's ascension, mass chaos and destruction, the world about to end at sunrise, et cetera. It was difficult to judge her hippoish expressions [Yes, Carter, I'm *sure* that's a word], but as I spoke, Tawaret twirled her long black hair nervously.

"That's not good," she said. "Not good at all."

She glanced behind her at the sundial. Despite the lack of sun, the needle cast a clear shadow over the hieroglyphic number five:

"You're running out of time," she said.

Carter frowned at the sundial. "Isn't this place the Fourth House of the Night?"

"Yes, dear," Tawaret agreed. "It goes by different names —Sunny Acres, the House of Rest—but it's also the Fourth House."

"So how can the sundial be on five?" he asked. "Shouldn't we be, like, frozen at the fourth hour?"

"Doesn't work that way, kid," Bes put in. "Time in the mortal world doesn't stop passing just because you're in the Fourth House. If you want to follow the sun god's voyage, you have to keep in synch with his timing."

I felt a head-splitting explanation coming on. I was ready to accept blissful ignorance and get on with finding Ra, but Carter, naturally, wouldn't let it drop.

"So what happens if we get too far behind?" he asked.

Tawaret checked the sundial again, which was slowly creeping past five. "The houses are connected to their times of night. You can stay in each one as long as you want, but you can only enter or exit them close to the hours they represent."

"Uh-huh." I rubbed my temples. "Do you have any headache medicine behind that nurses' station?"

"It's not that confusing," said Carter, just to be annoying. "It's like a revolving door. You have to wait for an opening and jump in."

"More or less," Tawaret agreed. "There *is* a little wiggle room with most of the Houses. You can leave the Fourth House, for instance, pretty much whenever you want. But certain gates are impossible to pass unless you time it exactly right. You can only enter the First House at sunset. You can only exit the Twelfth House at dawn. And the gates of the Eighth House, the House of Challenges…can only be entered during the eighth hour."

"House of Challenges?" I said. "I hate it already."

"Oh, you have Bes with you." Tawaret stared at him dreamily. "The challenges won't be a problem."

Bes shot me a panicked look, like, *Save me!*

"But if you take too long," Tawaret continued, "the gates will close before you can get there. You'll be locked in the Duat until tomorrow night."

"And if we don't stop Apophis," I said, "there won't *be* a tomorrow night. *That* part I understand."

"So can you help us?" Carter asked Tawaret. "Where is Ra?"

The goddess fidgeted with her hair. Her hands were a cross between human and hippo, with short stubby fingers and thick nails.

"That's the problem, dear," she said. "I don't know. The Fourth House is enormous. Ra is probably here somewhere, but the hallways and doors go on forever. We have *so* many patients."

"Don't you keep track of them?" Carter asked. "Isn't there a map or something?"

Tawaret shook her head sadly. "I do my best, but it's just me, the *shabti* and the servant lights…. And there are thousands of old gods."

My heart sank. I could barely keep track of the ten or so major gods I'd met, but *thousands*? In this room alone, I counted a dozen patients, six hallways leading off in different directions, two staircases, and three elevators. Perhaps it was my imagination, but it seemed as if some of the hallways had appeared since we'd entered the room.

"*All* these old folks are gods?" I asked.

Tawaret nodded. "Most were minor deities even in ancient times. The magicians didn't consider them worth imprisoning. Over the centuries, they've wasted away, lonely and forgotten. Eventually they made their way here. They simply wait."

"To die?" I asked.

Tawaret got a faraway look in her eyes. "I wish I knew. Sometimes they disappear, but I don't know if they simply get lost wandering the halls, or find a new room to hide in, or truly fade to nothing. The sad truth is it amounts to the same thing. Their names have been forgotten by the world above. Once your name is no longer spoken, what good is life?"

She glanced at Bes, as if trying to tell him something.

The dwarf god looked away quickly. "That's Mekhit, isn't it?" He pointed to the old lion woman who was making her way around in a wheelchair. "She had a temple near Abydos, I think. Minor lion goddess. Always got confused with Sekhmet."

The lioness snarled weakly when Bes said the name Sekhmet. Then she went back to rolling her chair, muttering, "Meow, meow."

"Sad story," Tawaret said. "She came here with her husband, the god Onuris. They were a celebrity couple in the old days, so romantic. He once traveled all the way to Nubia to rescue her. They got married. Happy ending, we all thought. But they were both forgotten. They came here together. Then Onuris disappeared. Mekhit's mind began to go quickly after that. Now she rolls her chair around the room aimlessly all day. She can't remember her own name, though we keep reminding her."

I thought about Khnum, whom we'd met on the river, and how sad he'd seemed, not knowing his secret name. I looked at the old goddess Mekhit, meowing and snarling and scooting along with no memory of her former glory. I imagined trying to care for a thousand gods like that—senior citizens who never got better and never died.

"Tawaret, how can you stand it?" I said in awe. "Why do you work here?"

She touched her nurse's cap self-consciously. "A long story, dear. And we have very little time. I wasn't always here. I was once a protector goddess. I scared away demons, though not as well as Bes."

"You were plenty scary," Bes said.

The hippo goddess sighed with adoration. "That's *so* sweet. I also protected mothers giving birth —"

"Because you're pregnant?" Carter asked, nodding at her enormous belly.

Tawaret looked mystified. "No. Why would you think that?"

"Um—"

"So!" I broke in. "You were explaining why you take care of aging gods."

Tawaret checked the sundial, and I was alarmed to see how fast the shadow was creeping

toward six. "I've always liked to help people, but in the world above, well…it became clear I wasn't needed anymore."

She was careful not to look at Bes, but the dwarf god blushed even more.

"Someone *was* needed to look after the aging gods," Tawaret continued. "I suppose I understand their sadness. I understand about waiting forever—"

Bes coughed into his fist. "Look at the time! Yes, about Ra. Have you seen him since you've been working here?"

Tawaret considered. "It's possible. I saw a falcon-headed god in a room in the southeast wing, oh, ages ago. I thought it was Nemty, but it's possible it could have been Ra. He sometimes liked to go about in falcon form."

"Which way?" I pleaded. "If we can get close, the Book of Ra may be able to guide us."

Tawaret turned to Bes. "Are *you* asking me for this, Bes? Do you truly believe it's important, or are you just doing it because Bast told you to?"

"No! Yes!" He puffed out his cheeks in exasperation. "I mean, yes, it's important. Yes, I'm asking. I need your help."

Tawaret pulled a torch from the nearest sconce. "In that case, right this way."

We wandered the halls of an infinite magic nursing home, led by a hippo nurse with a torch. Really, just an ordinary night for the Kanes.

We passed so many bedrooms I lost count. Most of the doors were closed, but a few were open, showing frail old gods in their beds, staring at the flickering blue light of televisions or simply lying in the dark crying. After twenty or thirty such rooms, I stopped looking. It was too depressing.

I held the Book of Ra, hoping it would get warmer as we approached the sun god, but no such luck. Tawaret hesitated at each intersection. I could tell she felt uncertain about where she was leading us.

After a few more hallways and still no change in the scroll, I began to feel frantic. Carter must've noticed.

"It's okay," he promised. "We'll find him."

I remembered how fast the sundial had been moving at the nurses' station. And I thought about Vlad Menshikov. I wanted to believe he'd been turned into a deep-fried Russian when he fell into the Lake of Fire, but that was probably too much to hope for. If he was still hunting us, he couldn't be far behind.

We turned down another corridor and Tawaret froze. "Oh, dear."

In front of us, an old woman with the head of a frog was jumping around—and when I say jumping, I mean she leaped ten feet, croaked a few times, then leaped against the wall and stuck there before leaping to the opposite wall. Her body and limbs looked human, dressed in a green hospital gown, but her head was all amphibian—brown, moist, and warty. Her bulbous eyes turned in every direction, and by the distressed sound of her croaking, I guessed she was lost.

"Heket's got out again," Tawaret said. "Excuse me a moment."

She hurried over to the frog woman.

Bes pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his Hawaiian shirt. He dabbed his forehead

nervously. “I wondered what had ever happened to Heket. She’s the frog goddess, you know.”

“I never would’ve guessed,” Carter said.

I watched as Tawaret tried to calm down the old goddess. She spoke in soothing tones, promising to help Heket find her room if she’d just stop bouncing off the walls.

“She’s brilliant,” I said. “Tawaret, I mean.”

“Yeah,” Bes said. “Yeah, she’s fine.”

“Fine?” I said. “Clearly, she likes you. Why are you so…”

Suddenly the truth smacked me in the face. I felt almost as thick as Carter.

“Oh, I see. She mentioned a horrible time at a palace, didn’t she? She’s the one who freed you in Russia.”

Bes mopped his neck with the handkerchief. He really was sweating quite a lot. “Wh-what makes you say that?”

“Because you’re so embarrassed around her! Like…” I was about to say “like she’s seen you in your underpants,” but I doubted that would mean much to the God of Speedos. “Like she’s seen you at your worst, and you want to forget it.”

Bes stared at Tawaret with a pained expression, the way he had stared at Prince Menshikov’s palace in St. Petersburg.

“She’s *always* saving me,” he said bitterly. “She’s always wonderful, nice, kind. Back in ancient times, everyone assumed we were dating. They always said we were a cute couple—the two demon-scaring gods, the two misfits, whatever. We did go out a few times, but Tawaret was just too—too *nice.* And I was kind of obsessed with somebody else.”

“Bast,” Carter guessed.

The dwarf god’s shoulders slumped. “That obvious, huh? Yeah, Bast. She was the most popular goddess with the common folk. I was the most popular god. So, you know, we’d see each other at festivals and such. She was…well, beautiful.”

Typical man, I thought. Only seeing the surface. But I kept my mouth shut.

“Anyway,” Bes sighed, “Bast treated me like a little brother. She still does. Has no interest in me at all, but it took me a long time to realize that. I was so obsessed, I wasn’t very good to Tawaret over the years.”

“But she came to get you in Russia,” I said.

He nodded. “I sent out distress calls. I thought Bast would come to my aid. Or Horus. Or somebody. I didn’t know where they all were, you understand, but I had a lot of friends back in the old days. I figured somebody would show up. The only one who did was Tawaret. She risked her life sneaking into the palace during the dwarf wedding. She saw the whole thing—saw me humiliated in front of the big folk. During the night, she broke my cage and freed me. I owe her everything. But once I was free…I just fled. I was so ashamed, I couldn’t look at her. Every time I think of her, I think about that night, and I hear the laughing.”

The pain in his voice was raw, as if he were describing something that had happened yesterday, not three centuries ago.

“Bes, it isn’t her fault,” I said gently. “She cares about you. It’s obvious.”

“It’s too late,” he said. “I’ve hurt her too much. I wish I could turn back the clock, but…”

He faltered. Tawaret was walking toward us, leading the frog goddess by the arm.

"Now, dear," Tawaret said, "just come with us, and we'll find your room. No need for leaping."

"But it's a leap of faith," Heket croaked. (I mean she made that sound; she didn't die in front of us, thankfully.) "My temple is around here somewhere. It was in Qus. Lovely city."

"Yes, dear," Tawaret said. "But your temple is gone now. All our temples are gone. You have a nice bedroom, though—"

"No," Heket murmured. "The priests will have sacrifices for me. I have to…"

She fixed her large yellow eyes on me, and I understood how a fly must feel right before it's zapped by a frog tongue.

"That's my priestess!" Heket said. "She's come to visit me."

"No, dear," Tawaret said. "That's Sadie Kane."

"My priestess." Heket patted my shoulder with her moist webbed hand, and I did my best not to cringe. "Tell the temple to start without me, will you? I'll be along later. Will you tell them?"

"Um, yeah," I said. "Of course, Lady Heket."

"Good, good." Her eyes became unfocused. "Very sleepy now. Hard work, remembering…"

"Yes, dear," Tawaret said. "Why don't you lie down in one of these rooms for now?"

She shepherded Heket into the nearest vacant room.

Bes followed her with sad eyes. "I'm a terrible dwarf."

Perhaps I should've reassured him, but my mind was racing on to other matters. *Start without me,* Heket had said. *A leap of faith.*

Suddenly I found it hard to breathe.

"Sadie?" Carter asked. "What's wrong?"

"I know why the scroll isn't guiding us," I said. "I have to start the second part of the spell."

"But we're not there yet," Carter said.

"And we won't be unless I start the spell. It's part of finding Ra."

"What is?" Tawaret appeared at Bes's side and almost scared the dwarf out of his Hawaiian shirt.

"The spell," I said. "I have to take a leap of faith."

"I think the frog goddess infected her," Carter fretted.

"No, you dolt!" I said. "This is the only way to find Ra. I'm sure of it."

"Hey, kid," Bes said, "if you start that spell, and we don't find Ra by the time you're finished reading it—"

"I know. The spell will backfire." When I said *backfire,* I meant it quite literally. If the spell didn't find its proper target, the power of the Book of Ra might blow up in my face.

"It's the only way," I insisted. "We don't have time to wander the halls forever, and Ra will only appear if we invoke him. We have to prove ourselves by taking the risk. You'll have to lead me. I can't stumble on the words."

"You have courage, dear." Tawaret held up her torch. "Don't worry, I'll guide you. Just do your reading."

I opened the scroll to the second section. The rows of hieroglyphs, which had once seemed like disconnected phrases of rubbish, now made perfect sense.

"'I invoke the name of Ra,'" I read aloud, "'the sleeping king, lord of the noonday sun, who sits upon the throne of fire…'"

Well, you get the idea. I described how Ra rose from the sea of Chaos. I recalled his light shining on the primordial land of Egypt, bringing life to the Nile Valley. As I read, I felt warmer.

"Sadie," Carter said, "you're smoking."

Hard not to panic when someone makes a comment like that, but I realized Carter was right. Smoke was curling off my body, forming a column of gray that drifted down the hallway.

"Is it my imagination," Carter asked, "or is the smoke showing us the way? Ow!"

He said that last part because I stomped his foot, which I could do quite well without breaking my concentration. He got the message: *Shut up and start walking*.

Tawaret took my arm and guided me forward. Bes and Carter flanked us like security guards. We followed the trail of smoke down two more corridors and up a flight of stairs. The Book of Ra became uncomfortably warm in my hands. The smoke from my body began obscuring the letters.

"You're doing well, Sadie," Tawaret said. "This hallway looks familiar."

I don't know how she could tell, but I stayed focused on the scroll. I described Ra's sun boat sailing across the sky. I spoke of his kingly wisdom and the battles he'd won against Apophis.

A bead of sweat trickled down my face. My eyes began to burn. I hoped they weren't literally on fire.

When I came to the line, "Ra, the sun's zenith…" I realized we'd stopped in front of a door.

It didn't look any different from any other door, but I pushed it open and stepped inside. I kept reading, though I was quickly approaching the end of the spell.

Inside, the room was dark. In the sputtering light of Tawaret's torch, I saw the oldest man in the world sleeping in bed—his face shriveled, his arms like sticks, his skin so translucent, I could see every vein. Some of the mummies in Bahariya had looked more alive than this old husk.

"'The light of Ra returns,'" I read. I nodded at the heavily curtained windows, and fortunately Bes and Carter got my meaning. They yanked back the curtains, and red light from the Lake of Fire flooded the room. The old man didn't move. His mouth was pursed like his lips had been sewn together.

I moved to his bedside and kept reading. I described Ra awakening at dawn, sitting in his throne as his boat climbed the sky, the plants turning toward the warmth of the sun.

"It's not working," Bes muttered.

I began to panic. There were only two lines left. I could feel the power of the spell backing up, beginning to overheat my body. I was still smoking, and I didn't like the smell of flame-broiled Sadie. I had to awaken Ra or I'd burn alive.

The god's mouth… Of course.

I set the scroll on Ra's bed and did my best to hold it open with one hand. "'I sing the praises of the sun god.'"

I stretched out my free hand to Carter and snapped my fingers.

Thank goodness, Carter understood.

He rummaged through my bag and passed me the obsidian *netjeri* blade from Anubis. If ever there was a moment for Opening the Mouth, this was it.

I touched the knife to the old man's lips and spoke the last line of the spell: "'Awake, my king, with the new day.'"

The old man gasped. Smoke spiraled into his mouth like he'd become a vacuum cleaner, and the magic of the spell funneled into him. My temperature dropped to normal. I almost collapsed with relief.

Ra's eyes fluttered open. With horrified fascination, I watched as blood began to flow through his veins again, slowly inflating him like a hot air balloon.

He turned toward me, his eyes unfocused and milky with cataracts. *"Uh?"*

"He still looks old," Carter said nervously. "Isn't he supposed to look young?"

Tawaret curtsied to the sun god (which you should not try at home if you are a pregnant hippo in heels) and felt Ra's forehead. "He isn't whole yet," she said. "You'll need to complete the night's journey."

"And the third part of the spell," Carter guessed. "He's got one more aspect, right? The scarab?"

Bes nodded, though he didn't look terribly optimistic. "Khepri, the beetle. Maybe if we find the last part of his soul, he'll be reborn properly."

Ra broke into a toothless grin. "I like zebras!"

I was so tired, I wondered if I'd heard him correctly. "Sorry, did you say zebras?"

He beamed at us like a child who'd just discovered something wonderful. "Weasels are sick."

"O-h-h-kay," Carter said. "Maybe he needs these…"

Carter took the crook and flail from his belt. He offered them to Ra. The old god pulled the crook to his mouth and began gumming it like a pacifier.

I started to feel uneasy, and not just because of Ra's condition. How much time had passed, and where was Vlad Menshikov?

"Let's get him to the boat," I said. "Bes, can you—"

"Yep. Excuse me, Lord Ra. I'll have to carry you." He scooped the sun god out of bed and we bolted from the room. Ra couldn't have weighed very much, and Bes didn't have any difficulty keeping up despite his short legs. We ran down the corridor, retracing our steps, as Ra warbled, *"Wheeee! Wheeee! Wheeee!"*

Perhaps *he* was having a good time, but I was mortified. We'd been through so much trouble, and *this* was the sort of god we'd woken? Carter looked as grim as I felt.

We raced past other decrepit gods, who all got quite excited. Some pointed and made gurgling noises. One old jackal-headed god rattled his IV pole and yelled, "Here comes the sun! There goes the sun!"

We burst into the lobby, and Ra said, "*Uh-oh. Uh-oh* on the floor."

His head lolled. I thought he wanted to get down. Then I realized he was looking at something. On the floor next to my foot lay a glittering silver necklace: a familiar amulet shaped like a snake.

For someone who'd been smoking hot only a few minutes before, I suddenly felt terribly chilly.

“Menshikov,” I said. “He was here.”

Carter drew his wand and scanned the room. “But where is he? Why would he just drop that and walk away?”

“He left it on purpose,” I guessed. “He wants to taunt us.”

As soon as I said it, I knew it was true. I could almost hear Menshikov laughing as he continued his journey downriver, leaving us behind.

“We have to get to the boat!” I said. “Hurry, before—”

“Sadie.” Bes pointed to the nurses’ station. His expression was grim.

“Oh, no,” Tawaret said. “No, no, no…”

On the sundial, the needle’s shadow was pointing to eight. That meant even if we could still leave the Fourth House, even if we could get through the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Houses, it wouldn’t matter. According to what Tawaret had told us, the gates of the Eighth House would already be closed.

No wonder Menshikov had left us here without bothering to fight us.

We’d already lost.

CARTER

21. We Buy Some Time

AFTER SAYING GOOD-BYE TO Zia at the Great Pyramid, I didn't think I could possibly get more depressed. I was wrong.

Standing on the docks of the Lake of Fire, I felt like I might as well do a cannonball into the lava.

It wasn't fair. We'd come all this way and risked so much just to be beaten by a time limit. Game over. How was *anyone* supposed to succeed in bringing back Ra? It was impossible.

Carter, this isn't a game, the voice of Horus said inside my head. *It isn't* supposed *to be possible. You must keep going.*

I didn't see why. The gates of the Eighth House were already closed. Menshikov had sailed on and left us behind.

Maybe that had been his plan all along. He'd let us wake Ra only partially so the sun god remained old and feeble. Then Menshikov would leave us trapped in the Duat while he used whatever evil magic he'd planned to free Apophis. When the dawn came, there would be no sunrise, no return of Ra. Instead Apophis would rise and destroy civilization. Our friends would have fought all night at Brooklyn House for nothing. Twenty-four hours from now, when we finally managed to leave the Duat, we'd find the world a dark, frozen wasteland, ruled by Chaos. Everything we cared about would be gone. Then Apophis could swallow Ra and complete his victory.

Why should we keep charging forward when the battle was lost?

A general never shows despair, Horus said. *He instills confidence in his troops. He leads them forward, even into the mouth of death.*

You're Mr. Cheerful, I thought. *Who invited you back into my head?*

But as irritating as Horus was, he had a point. Sadie had talked about hope—about believing that we could make Ma'at out of Chaos, even if it seemed impossible. Maybe that was all we could do: keep on trying, keep on believing we could salvage something from the disaster.

Amos, Zia, Walt, Jaz, Bast, and our young trainees…all of them were counting on us. If our friends were still alive, I couldn't give up. I owed them better than that.

Tawaret escorted us to the sun boat while a couple of her *shabti* carried Ra aboard.

"Bes, I'm so sorry," she said. "I wish there was more I could do."

"It's not your fault." Bes held out his hand like he wanted to shake, but when their fingers touched, he clasped hers. "Tawaret, it was never your fault."

She sniffled. "Oh, Bes…"

"Wheee!" Ra interrupted as the *shabti* set him in the boat. "See zebras! *Wheee!*"

Bes cleared his throat.

Tawaret let go of his hands. "You—you should go. Perhaps Aaru will provide an answer."

"Aaru?" I asked. "Who's that?"

Tawaret didn't exactly smile, but her eyes softened with kindness. "Not who, my dear. *Where*. It's the Seventh House. Tell your father hello."

My spirits lifted just a little. "Dad will be there?"

"Good luck, Carter and Sadie." Tawaret kissed us both on the cheek, which felt sort of like getting sideswiped by a friendly, bristly, slightly moist blimp.

The goddess looked at Bes, and I was sure she was going to cry. Then she turned and hurried up the steps, her *shabti* behind her.

"Weasels are sick," Ra said thoughtfully.

On that bit of godly wisdom, we boarded the ship. The glowing crew lights manned the oars, and the sun boat pulled away from the docks.

"Eat." Ra began gumming a piece of rope.

"No, you can't eat that, you old git," Sadie chided.

"Uh, kid?" Bes said. "Maybe you shouldn't call the king of the gods an old git."

"Well, he *is,"* Sadie said. "Come on, Ra. Come into the tent. I want to see something."

"No tent," he muttered. "Zebras."

Sadie tried to grab his arm, but he crawled away from her and stuck out his tongue. Finally she took the pharaoh's crook from my belt (without asking, of course) and waved it like a dog bone. "Want the crook, Ra? Nice tasty crook?"

Ra grabbed for it weakly. Sadie backed up and eventually managed to coax Ra into the pavilion. As soon as he reached the empty dais, a brilliant light exploded around him, completely blinding me.

"Carter, look!" Sadie cried.

"I wish I could." I blinked the yellow spots out of my eyes.

On the dais stood a chair of molten gold, a fiery throne carved with glowing white hieroglyphs. It looked just like Sadie had described from her vision, but in real life it was the most beautiful and terrifying piece of furniture I'd ever seen. The crew lights buzzed around it in excitement, brighter than ever.

Ra didn't seem to notice the chair, or he didn't care. His hospital gown had changed into regal robes with a collar of gold, but he still looked like the same withered old man.

"Have a seat," Sadie told him.

"Don't wanna chair," he muttered.

"That was almost a complete sentence," I said. "Maybe it's a good sign?"

"Zebras!" Ra grabbed the crook from Sadie and hobbled across the deck, yelling, *"Wheee! Wheee!"*

"Lord Ra!" Bes called. "Careful!"

I considered tackling the sun god before he could fall out of the boat, but I didn't know how the crew would react to that. Then Ra solved our problem for us. He smacked into the mast and crumpled

to the deck.

We all rushed forward, but the old god seemed only dazed.

He drooled and muttered as we dragged him back into the pavilion and set him on his throne. It was tricky, because the throne gave off heat of about a thousand degrees, and I didn't want to catch fire (again); but the heat didn't seem to bother Ra.

We stepped back and looked at the king of the gods, slumped in his chair snoring, and cradling his crook like a teddy bear. I placed the war flail across his lap, hoping it might make a difference—maybe complete his powers or something. No such luck.

"Sick weasels," Ra muttered.

"Behold," Sadie said bitterly. "The glorious Ra."

Bes shot her an irritated look. "That's right, kid. Make fun. We gods just love to have mortals laughing at us."

Sadie's expression softened. "I'm sorry, Bes. I didn't mean—"

"Whatever." He stormed to the prow of the boat.

Sadie gave me a pleading look. "Honestly, I didn't—"

"He's just stressed," I told her. "Like all of us. It'll be okay."

Sadie brushed a tear from her cheek. "The world is about to end, we're stuck in the Duat, and you think it'll be okay?"

"We're going to see Dad." I tried to sound confident, even though I didn't feel it. *A general never shows despair.* "He'll help us."

We sailed through the Lake of Fire until the shores narrowed, and the flaming current turned back into water. The glow of the lake faded behind us. The river got swifter, and I knew we'd entered the Fifth House.

I thought about Dad, and whether or not he'd really be able to help us. The last few months he'd been strangely silent. I guess that shouldn't have surprised me, since he was the Lord of the Underworld now. He probably didn't get good cell phone reception down here. Still, the idea of seeing him at the moment of my biggest failure made me nervous.

Even though the river was dark, the throne of fire was almost too bright to look at. Our boat cast a warm glow over the shores.

On either side of the river, ghostly villages appeared out of the gloom. Lost souls ran to the riverbank to watch us pass. After so many millennia in the darkness, they looked stunned to see the sun god. Many tried to shout for joy, but their mouths made no sound. Others stretched out their arms toward Ra. They smiled as they basked in his warm light. Their forms seemed to solidify. Color returned to their faces and their clothes. As they faded behind us in the darkness, I was left with the image of their grateful faces and outstretched hands.

Somehow that made me feel better. At least we'd shown them the sun one last time before Chaos destroyed the world.

I wondered if Amos and our friends were still alive, defending Brooklyn House against Vlad Menshikov's attack squad and waiting for us to show up. I wished I could see Zia again, if only to apologize for failing her.

The Fifth and Sixth houses passed quickly, though I couldn't be sure how much time actually

went by. We saw more ghost villages, beaches made of bones, entire caverns where winged *ba* flew around in confusion, bonking into walls and swarming the sun boat like moths around a porch light. We navigated some scary rapids, though the glowing crew lights made it look easy. A few times dragonlike monsters rose out of the river, but Bes yelled, "Boo!" and the monsters whimpered and sank beneath the water. Ra slept through it all, snoring fitfully on his burning throne.

Finally the river slowed and widened. The water turned as smooth as melted chocolate. The sun boat entered a new cavern, and the ceiling overhead blazed with blue crystals, reflecting Ra's light so it looked like the regular sun was crossing a brilliant blue sky. Marsh grass and palm trees lined the shore. Farther away, rolling green hills were dotted with cozy-looking white adobe cottages. A flock of geese flew overhead. The air smelled like jasmine and fresh-baked bread. My whole body relaxed—the way you might feel after a long trip, when you walk into your house and finally get to collapse on your bed.

"Aaru," Bes announced. He didn't sound as grumpy now. The worry lines on his face faded. "The Egyptian afterlife. The Seventh House. I suppose you'd call it Paradise."

"Not that I'm complaining," Sadie said. "It's much nicer than Sunny Acres, and I smell decent food at last. But does this mean we're dead?"

Bes shook his head. "This was a regular part of Ra's nightly route—his pit stop, I guess you'd say. He would hang out for a while with his host, eat, drink, and rest up before the last stretch of his journey, which was the most dangerous."

"His host?" I asked, though I was pretty sure whom Bes meant.

Our boat turned toward a dock, where a man and a woman stood waiting for us. Dad wore his usual brown suit. His skin glowed with a bluish tint. Mom shimmered in ghostly white, her feet not quite touching the boards.

"Of course," Bes said. "This is the House of Osiris."

"Sadie, Carter." Dad pulled us into a hug like we were still little kids, but neither of us protested.

He felt solid and human, so much like his old self that it took all my willpower not to break down in tears. His goatee was neatly trimmed. His bald head gleamed. Even his cologne smelled the same: the faint scent of amber.

He held us at arm's length to examine us, his eyes shining. I could almost believe he was still a regular mortal, but if I looked closely, I could see another layer to his appearance, like a fuzzy superimposed image: a blue-skinned man in white robes and the crown of a pharaoh. Around his neck was a *djed* amulet, the symbol of Osiris.

"Dad," I said. "We failed."

"Shhh," he said. "None of that. This is a time to rest and renew."

Mom smiled. "We've been watching your progress. You've both been so brave."

Seeing her was even harder than seeing Dad. I couldn't hug her because she had no physical substance, and when she touched my face, it felt like nothing more than a warm breeze. She looked exactly as I remembered—her blond hair loose around her shoulders, her blue eyes full of life—but she was only a spirit now. Her white dress seemed to be woven from mist. If I looked directly at her, she seemed to dissolve in the light of the sun boat.

"I'm so proud of you both," she said. "Come, we've prepared a feast."

I was in a daze as they led us ashore. Bes took charge of carrying the sun god, who seemed in a good mood after head-butting the mast and taking a nap. Ra gave everyone a toothless grin and said, "Oh, pretty. Feast? Zebras?"

Ghostly servants in Ancient Egyptian clothes ushered us toward an outdoor pavilion lined with life-size statues of the gods. We crossed a footbridge over a moat full of albino crocodiles, which made me think about Philip of Macedonia, and what might be happening back at Brooklyn House.

Then I stepped inside the pavilion, and my jaw dropped.

A feast was spread out on a long mahogany table—*our* old dining table from the house in L.A. I could even see the notch I'd carved in the wood with my first Swiss Army knife—the only time I recall my dad getting really mad at me. The chairs were stainless steel with leather seats, just like I remembered; and when I looked outside, the view shimmered back and forth —now the grassy hills and glittering blue sky of the afterlife, now the white walls and huge glass windows of our old house.

"Oh…" Sadie said in a small voice. Her eyes were fixed on the center of the table. Among platters of pizza, bowls of sugarcoated strawberries, and every other kind of food you could imagine was a white-and-blue ice-cream cake, the exact same cake that we'd exploded on Sadie's sixth birthday.

"I hope you don't mind," Mom said. "I thought it was a shame you never got to taste it. Happy birthday, Sadie."

"Please, sit." Dad spread his arms. "Bes, old friend, would you put Lord Ra at the head of the table?"

I started to sit in the chair farthest from Ra, since I didn't want him slobbering all over me while he gummed his food, but Mom said, "Oh, not there, dear. Sit by me. That chair is for…another guest."

She said the last two words like they left a bitter taste in her mouth.

I looked around the table. There were seven chairs and only six of us. "Who else is coming?"

"Anubis?" Sadie asked hopefully.

Dad chuckled. "Not Anubis, though I'm sure he'd be here if he could."

Sadie slumped as if someone had let the air out of her. [Yes, Sadie, you *were* that obvious.]

"Where is he, then?" she asked.

Dad hesitated just long enough for me to sense his discomfort. "Away. Let's eat, shall we?"

I sat down and accepted a slice of birthday cake from a ghostly waiter. You wouldn't think I'd be hungry, with the world ending and our mission failed, sitting in the Land of the Dead at a dinner table from my past with my mom's ghost next to me and my dad the color of a blueberry. But my stomach didn't care about that. It let me know that I was still alive, and I needed food. The cake was chocolate with vanilla ice cream. It tasted perfect. Before I knew it, I'd polished off my slice and was loading my plate with pepperoni pizza. The statues of the gods stood behind us—Horus, Isis, Thoth, Sobek—all keeping silent watch as we ate. Outside the pavilion, the lands of Aaru spread out as if the cavern were endless—green hills and meadows, herds of fat cattle, fields of grain, orchards full of date trees. Streams cut the marshes into a patchwork of islands, just like the Nile Delta, with picture-perfect villages for the blessed dead. Sailboats cruised the river.

"This is what it looks like to the Ancient Egyptians," Dad said, as if reading my thoughts. "But each soul sees Aaru slightly differently."

"Like our house in L.A.?" I asked. "Our family back together around a dining table? Is this even real?"

Dad's eyes turned sad, the way they used to whenever I'd ask about Mom's death.

"The birthday cake is good, eh?" he asked. "My little girl, thirteen. I can't believe—"

Sadie swept her plate off the table. It shattered against the stone floor. "What does it matter?" she shouted. "The bloody sundial—the stupid gates—we failed!"

She buried her face in her arms and began to sob.

"Sadie." Mom hovered next to her like a friendly fog bank. "It's all right."

"Moon pie," Ra said helpfully, a beard of cake frosting smeared around his mouth. He started to fall out of his chair, and Bes pushed him back into place.

"Sadie's right," I said. "Ra's in worse shape than we imagined. Even if we could get him back to the mortal world, he could never defeat Apophis—unless Apophis laughs to death."

Dad frowned. "Carter, he is still Ra, pharaoh of the gods. Show some respect."

"Don't like bubbles!" Ra swatted at a glowing servant light that was trying to wipe his mouth.

"Lord Ra," Dad said, "do you remember me? I'm Osiris. You dined here at my table every night, resting before your journey toward the dawn. Do you recall?"

"Want a weasel," Ra said.

Sadie slapped the table. "What does that even *mean*?"

Bes scooped up a fistful of chocolate-covered things—I was afraid they might be grasshoppers—and tossed them into his mouth. "We haven't finished the Book of Ra. We'd need to find Khepri."

Dad stroked his goatee. "Yes, the scarab god, Ra's form as the rising sun. Perhaps if you found Khepri, Ra could be fully reborn. But you would need to pass through the gates of the Eighth House."

"Which are closed," I said. "We'd have to, like, reverse time."

Bes stopped munching grasshoppers. His eyes widened like he'd just had a revelation. He looked at my dad incredulously. "Him? You invited him?"

"Who?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

I stared at my dad, but he wouldn't meet my eyes.

"Dad, what is it?" I demanded. "There's a way through the gates? Can you teleport us to the other side or something?"

"I wish I could, Carter. But the journey must be followed. It is part of Ra's rebirth. I can't interfere with that. However, you're right: you need extra time. There might be a way, though I'd never suggest it if the stakes weren't so high—"

"It's dangerous," our mom warned. "I think it's *too* dangerous."

"What's too dangerous?" Sadie asked.

"Me, I suppose," said a voice behind me.

I turned and found a man standing with his hands on the back of my chair. Either he'd approached so silently, I hadn't heard him, or he'd materialized out of thin air.

He looked about twenty, thin and tall and kind of glamorous. His face was totally human, but his irises were silver. His head was shaven except for a glossy black ponytail on one side of his head,

like Ancient Egyptian youth used to wear. His silvery suit looked to have been tailored in Italy (I only know that because Amos and my dad both paid a *lot* of attention to suits). The fabric shimmered like some bizarre mix of silk and aluminum foil. His shirt was black and collarless, and several pounds of platinum chains hung around his neck. The biggest piece of bling was a silver crescent amulet. When his fingers drummed on the back of my chair, his rings and platinum Rolex flashed. If I'd seen him in the mortal world, I might've guessed he was a young Native American billionaire casino owner. But here in the Duat, with that crescent-shaped amulet around his neck…

"Moon pie!" Ra cackled with delight.

"You're Khonsu," I guessed. "The moon god."

He gave me a wolfish grin, looking at me as if I were an appetizer.

"At your service," he said. "Care to play a game?"

"Not you," Bes growled.

Khonsu spread his arms in a big air hug. "Bes, old buddy! How've you been?"

"Don't 'old buddy' me, you scam artist."

"I'm hurt!" Khonsu sat down on my right and leaned toward me conspiratorially. "Poor Bes gambled with me ages ago, you see. He wanted more time with Bast. He wagered a few feet of his height. I'm afraid he lost."

"That's not what happened!" Bes roared.

"Gentlemen," my father said in his sternest Dad tone. "You are both guests at my table. I won't have any fighting."

"Absolutely, Osiris." Khonsu beamed at him. "I'm honored to be here. And these are your famous children? Wonderful! Are you ready to play, kids?"

"Julius, they don't understand the risks," our mother protested. "We can't let them do this."

"Hang on," Sadie said. "Do *what,* exactly?"

Khonsu snapped his fingers, and all the food on the table disappeared, replaced by a glowing silver senet board. "Haven't you heard about me, Sadie? Didn't Isis tell you some stories? Or Nut? Now, there was a gambler! The sky goddess wouldn't stop playing until she'd won five whole days from me. Do you know the odds against winning that much time? Astronomical! Of course, she's covered with stars, so I suppose she *is* astronomical."

Khonsu laughed at his own joke. He didn't seem bothered that no one joined him.

"I remember," I said. "You gambled with Nut, and she won enough moonlight to create five extra days, the Demon Days. That let her get around Ra's commandment that her five children couldn't be born on any day of the year."

"Nuts," Ra muttered. "Bad nuts."

The moon god raised an eyebrow. "Dear me, Ra *is* in bad shape, isn't he? But yes, Carter Kane. You're absolutely right. I'm the moon god, but I also have some influence over time. I can lengthen or shorten the lives of mortals. Even gods can be affected by my powers. The moon is changeable, you see. Its light waxes and wanes. In my hands, time can also wax and wane. You need—what, about three extra hours? I can weave that for you out of moonlight, if you and your sister are willing to gamble for it. I can make it so that the gates of the Eighth House have not yet closed."

I didn't understand how he could possibly do that—back up time, insert three extra hours into the night—but for the first time since Sunny Acres, I felt a small spark of hope. "If you can help, why not just *give* us the extra time? The fate of the world is at stake."

Khonsu laughed. "Good one! *Give* you time! No, seriously. If I started giving away something that valuable, Ma'at would crumble. Besides, you can't play senet without gambling. Bes can tell you that."

Bes spit a chocolate grasshopper leg out of his mouth. "Don't do it, Carter. You know what they said about Khonsu in the old days? Some of the pyramids have a poem about him carved into the stones. It's called the 'Cannibal Hymn.' For a price, Khonsu would help the pharaoh slay any gods who were bothering him. Khonsu would devour their souls and gain their strength."

The moon god rolled his eyes. "Ancient history, Bes! I haven't devoured a soul in…what month is this? March? At any rate, I've completely adapted to this modern world. I'm quite civilized now. You should see my penthouse at the Luxor in Las Vegas. I mean, *Thank you!* America has a proper civilization!"

He smiled at me, his silver eyes flashing like a shark's. "So what do you say, Carter? Sadie? Play me at senet. Three pieces for me, three for you. You'll need three hours of moonlight, so you two will need one additional person to stake a wager. For every piece your team manages to move off the board, I'll grant you an extra hour. If you win, that's three extra hours—just enough time to make it past the gates of the Eighth House."

"And if we lose?" I asked.

"Oh…you know." Khonsu waved his hand as if this were an annoying technicality. "For each piece *I* move off the board, I'll take a *ren* from one of you."

Sadie sat forward. "You'll take our secret names—as in, we have to share them with you?"

"Share…" Khonsu stroked his ponytail, as if trying to remember the meaning of that word. "No, no sharing. I'll *devour* your *ren,* you see."

"Erase part of our souls," Sadie said. "Take our memories, our identity."

The moon god shrugged. "On the bright side, you wouldn't die. You'd just—"

"Turn into a vegetable," Sadie guessed. "Like Ra, there."

"Don't want vegetables," Ra muttered irritably. He tried to chew on Bes's shirt, but the dwarf god scooted away.

"Three hours," I said. "Wagered against three souls."

"Carter, Sadie, you don't have to do this," my mother said. "We don't expect you to take this risk."

I'd seen her so many times in pictures and in my memories, but for the first time it really struck me how much she looked like Sadie—or how much Sadie was starting to look like her. They both had the same fiery determination in their eyes. They both tilted their chins up when they were expecting a fight. And they both weren't very good at hiding their feelings. I could tell from Mom's shaky voice that she realized what had to happen. She was telling us we had options, but she knew very well that we didn't.

I looked at Sadie, and we came to a silent agreement.

"Mom, it's okay," I said. "You gave your life to close Apophis's prison. How can we back out?"

Khonsu rubbed his hands. "Ah, yes, Apophis's prison! Your friend Menshikov is there right now, loosening the Serpent's bonds. I have so many bets on what will happen! Will you get there in time to stop him? Will you return Ra to the world? Will you defeat Menshikov? I'm giving a hundred to one on that!"

Mom turned desperately to my father. "Julius, tell them! It's too dangerous."

My dad was still holding a plate of half-eaten birthday cake. He stared at the melting ice cream as if it were the saddest thing in the world.

"Carter and Sadie," he said at last, "I brought Khonsu here so that you'd have the choice. But whatever you do, I'm still proud of you both. If the world ends tonight, that won't change."

He met my eyes, and I could see how much it hurt him to think about losing us. Last Christmas at the British Museum, he'd sacrificed his life to release Osiris and restore balance to the Duat. He'd left Sadie and me alone, and I'd resented him a long time for that. Now I realized what it was like to be in his position. He'd been willing to give up everything, even his life, for a bigger purpose.

"I understand, Dad," I told him. "We're Kanes. We don't run from hard choices."

He didn't answer, but he nodded slowly. His eyes burned with fierce pride.

"For once," Sadie said, "Carter's right. Khonsu, we'll play your stupid game."

"Excellent!" Khonsu said. "That's two souls. Two hours to win. Ah, but you'll need three hours to get through the gates on time, won't you? Hmm. I'm afraid you can't use Ra. He's not in his right mind. Your mother is already dead. Your father is the judge of the underworld, so he's disqualified from soul wagering…."

"I'll do it," Bes said. His face was grim but determined.

"Old buddy!" Khonsu cried. "I'm delighted."

"Stuff it, moon god," Bes said. "I don't like it, but I'll do it."

"Bes," I said, "you've done enough for us. Bast would never expect you—"

"I'm not doing it for Bast!" he grumbled. Then he took a deep breath. "Look, you kids are the real deal. Last couple of days—for the first time in ages I've felt wanted again. Important. Not like a sideshow attraction. If things go wrong, just tell Tawaret…" He cleared his throat and gave Sadie a meaningful look. "Tell her I tried to turn back the clock."

"Oh, Bes." Sadie got up and ran around the table. She hugged the dwarf god and kissed his cheek.

"All right, all right," he muttered. "Don't go sappy on me. Let's play this game."

"Time is money," Khonsu agreed.

Our parents stood.

"We cannot stay for this," Dad said. "But, children…"

He didn't seem to know how to complete the thought. *Good luck* probably wouldn't have cut it. I could see the guilt and worry in his eyes, but he was trying hard not to show it. *A good general,* Horus would have said.

"We love you," our mother finished. "You will prevail."

With that, our parents turned to mist and vanished. Everything outside the pavilion darkened like a stage set. The senet game began to glow brighter.

"Shiny," Ra said.

"Three blue pieces for you," Khonsu said. "Three silver pieces for me. Now, who's feeling lucky?"

The game started well enough. Sadie had skill at tossing the sticks. Bes had several thousand years of gaming experience. And I got the job of moving the pieces and making sure Ra didn't eat them.

At first it wasn't obvious who was winning. We just rolled and moved, and it was hard to believe we were playing for our souls, or true names, or whatever you want to call them.

We bumped one of Khonsu's pieces back to start, but he didn't seem upset. He seemed delighted by just about everything.

"Doesn't it bother you?" I asked at one point. "Devouring innocent souls?"

"Not really." He polished his crescent amulet. "Why should it?"

"But we're trying to save the world," Sadie said, "Ma'at, the gods—everything. Don't you care if the world crumbles into Chaos?"

"Oh, it wouldn't be so bad," Khonsu said. "Change comes in phases, Ma'at and Chaos, Chaos and Ma'at. Being the moon god, I appreciate variation. Now, Ra, poor guy—he always stuck to a schedule. Same path every night. So predictable and boring. Retiring was the most interesting thing he ever did. If Apophis takes over and swallows the sun, well—I suppose the moon will still be there."

"You're insane," Sadie said.

"Ha! I'll bet you five extra minutes of moonlight that I'm perfectly sane."

"Forget it," Sadie said. "Just roll."

Khonsu tossed the sticks. The bad news: he made alarming progress. He rolled a five and got one of his pieces almost to the end of the board. The good news: the piece got stuck at the House of Three Truths, which meant he could only roll a three to get it out.

Bes studied the board intently. He didn't seem to like what he saw. We had one piece way back at the start and two pieces on the last row of the board.

"Careful now," Khonsu warned. "This is where it gets interesting."

Sadie rolled a four, which gave us two options. Our lead piece could go out. Or our second piece could bump Khonsu's piece from the House of Three Truths and send it back to Start.

"Bump him," I said. "It's safer."

Bes shook his head. "Then *we're* stuck in the House of Three Truths. The chances of him rolling a three are slim. Take your first piece out. That way you'll be assured of at least one extra hour."

"But one extra hour won't do it," Sadie said.

Khonsu seemed to be enjoying our indecision. He sipped wine from a silvery goblet and smiled. Meanwhile Ra entertained himself by trying to pick the spikes off his war flail. "Ow, ow, ow."

My forehead beaded with sweat. How was I sweating in a *board* game? "Bes, are you sure?"

"It's your best bet," he said.

"*Bes* best?" Khonsu chuckled. "Nice!"

I wanted to smack the moon god, but I kept my mouth shut. I moved our first piece out of play.

"Congratulations!" Khonsu said. "I owe you one hour of moonlight. Now it's my turn."

He tossed the sticks. They clattered on the dining table, and I felt like someone had snipped an elevator cable in my chest, plunging my heart straight down a shaft. Khonsu had rolled a three.

"Whoopsie!" Ra dropped his flail.

Khonsu moved his piece out of play. "Oh, what a shame. Now, whose *ren* do I collect first?"

"No, please!" Sadie said. "Trade back. Take the hour you owe us instead."

"Those aren't the rules," Khonsu chided.

I looked down at the gouge I'd made in the table when I was eight. I knew that memory was about to disappear, like all my others. If I gave my *ren* to Khonsu, at least Sadie could still cast the final part of the spell. She would need Bes to protect her and advise her. I was the only expendable one.

I started to say, "I—"

"Me," said Bes. "The move was my idea."

"Bes, no!" Sadie cried.

The dwarf stood. He planted his feet and balled his fists, like he was getting ready to let loose with a BOO. I wished he'd do that and scare away Khonsu, but instead he looked at us with resignation. "It was part of the strategy, kids."

"What?" I asked. "You *planned* this?"

He slipped off his Hawaiian shirt and folded it carefully, setting it on the table. "Most important thing is getting all three of your pieces off the board, and losing no more than one. This was the only way to do it. You'll beat him easily now. Sometimes you have to lose a piece to win a game."

"So true," Khonsu said. "What a delight! A god's *ren.* Are you ready, Bes?"

"Bes, don't," I pleaded. "This isn't right."

He scowled at me. "Hey, kid, *you* were willing to sacrifice. Are you saying I'm not as brave as some pipsqueak magician? Besides, I'm a god. Who knows? Sometimes we come back. Now, win the game and get out of here. Kick Menshikov in the knee for me."

I tried to think of something to say, something that would stop this, but Bes said, "I'm ready."

Khonsu closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, like he was enjoying some fresh mountain air. Bes's form flickered. He dissolved into a montage of lightning-fast images—a troupe of dwarves dancing at a temple in the firelight; a crowd of Egyptians partying at a festival, carrying Bes and Bast on their shoulders; Bes and Tawaret in togas at some Roman villa, eating grapes and laughing together on a sofa; Bes dressed like George Washington in a powdered wig and silk suit, doing cartwheels in front of some British redcoats; Bes in the olive fatigues of a U.S. Marine, scaring away a demon in a World War II Nazi uniform.

As his silhouette melted, more recent images flickered past: Bes in a chauffeur's uniform with a placard that read KANE; Bes pulling us out of our sinking limo in the Mediterranean; Bes casting spells on me in Alexandria when I was poisoned, trying desperately to heal me; Bes and me in the back of the Bedouins' pickup truck, sharing goat meat and Vaseline-flavored water as we traveled along the bank of the Nile. His last memory: two kids, Sadie and me, looking at him with love and concern. Then the image faded, and Bes was gone. Even his Hawaiian shirt had disappeared.

"You took all of him!" I yelled. "His body—everything. That wasn't the deal!"

Khonsu opened his eyes and sighed deeply. "That was lovely." He smiled at us as if nothing had

happened. “I believe it’s your turn.”

His silver eyes were cold and luminous, and I had a feeling that for the rest of my life, I would hate looking at the moon.

Maybe it was rage, or Bes’s strategy, or maybe we just got lucky, but the rest of the game Sadie and I destroyed Khonsu easily. We bumped his pieces at every opportunity. Within five minutes, our last piece was off the board.

Khonsu spread his hands. “Well done! Three hours are yours. If you hurry, you can make the gates of the Eighth House.”

“I hate you,” Sadie said. It was the first she’d spoken since Bes disappeared. “You’re cold, calculating, horrible—”

“And I’m just what you needed.” Khonsu took off his platinum Rolex and wound back the time—one, two, three hours. All around us, the statues of the gods flickered and jumped like the world was being slammed into reverse.

“Now,” Khonsu said, “would you like to spend your hard-earned time complaining? Or do you want to save this poor old fool of a king?”

“Zebras?” Ra muttered hopefully.

“Where are our parents?” I asked. “At least let us say good-bye.”

Khonsu shook his head. “Time is precious, Carter Kane. You should’ve learned that lesson. It’s best that I send you on your way; but if you ever want to gamble with me again—for seconds, hours, even days—just let me know. Your credit is good.”

I couldn’t stand it. I lunged at Khonsu, but the moon god vanished. The whole pavilion faded, and Sadie and I were standing on the deck of the sun boat again, sailing down the dark river. The glowing crew lights buzzed around us, manning the oars and trimming the sail. Ra sat on his fiery throne, playing with his crook and flail like they were puppets having an imaginary conversation.

In front of us, a pair of enormous stone gates loomed out of the darkness. Eight massive snakes were carved into the rock, four on each side. The gates were slowly closing, but the sun boat slipped through just in time, and we passed into the Eighth House.

I have to say, the House of Challenges didn’t seem very challenging. We fought monsters, yes. Serpents loomed out of the river. Demons arose. Ships full of ghosts tried to board the sun boat. We destroyed them all. I was so angry, so devastated at losing Bes, that I imagined every threat was the moon god Khonsu. Our enemies didn’t stand a chance.

Sadie cast spells I’d never seen her use. She summoned sheets of ice that probably matched her emotions, leaving several demon icebergs in our wake. She turned an entire shipful of pirate ghosts into Khonsu bobble-heads, then vaporized them in a miniature nuclear explosion. Meanwhile, Ra played happily with his toys while the light servants flittered around the deck in agitation, apparently sensing that our journey was reaching a critical phase. The Ninth, Tenth, and Eleventh Houses passed in a blur. From time to time I heard a splash in the water behind us, like the oar of another boat. I looked back, wondering if Menshikov had somehow gotten on our tail again, but I didn’t see anything. If something *was* following us, it knew better than to show itself.

At last I heard a roar up ahead, like another waterfall or a stretch of rapids. The light orbs worked furiously taking down the sail, pushing on the oars, but we kept gaining speed.

We passed under a low archway carved like the goddess Nut, her starry limbs stretched out

protectively and her face smiling in welcome. I got the feeling we were entering the Twelfth House, the last part of the Duat before we emerged into a new dawn.

I hoped to see light at the end of the tunnel, literally, but instead our path had been sabotaged. I could see where the river was *supposed* to go. The tunnel continued ahead, slowly winding out of the Duat. I could even smell fresh air—the scent of the mortal world. But the far end of the tunnel had been drained to a field of mud. In front of us, the river plunged into a massive pit, like an asteroid had punched a hole in the earth and diverted the water straight down. We were racing toward the drop.

"We could jump," Sadie said. "Abandon ship…"

But I think we came to the same conclusion. We needed the sun boat. We needed Ra. We had to follow the course of the river wherever it led.

"It's a trap," Sadie said. "The work of Apophis."

"I know," I said. "Let's go tell him we don't like his work."

We both grabbed the mast as the ship plunged into the maelstrom.

It seemed like we fell forever. You know the feeling when you dive to the bottom of a deep pool, like your nose and ears are going to explode, and your eyes are going to pop out of your head? Imagine that feeling a hundred times worse. We were sinking into the Duat deeper than we'd ever been—deeper than any mortal was supposed to go. The molecules of my body felt like they were heating up, buzzing so fast they might fly apart.

We didn't crash. We didn't hit bottom. The boat simply flipped direction, like down had become sideways, and we sailed into a cavern that glowed with harsh red light. The magical pressure was so intense that my ears rang. I was nauseated and I could barely think straight, but I recognized the shoreline up ahead: a beach made of millions of dead scarab shells, shifting and surging as a force underneath—a massive serpentine shape—struggled to break free. Dozens of demons were digging through the scarab shells with shovels. And standing on the shore, waiting for us patiently, was Vlad Menshikov, his clothes charred and smoking, his staff glowing with green fire.

"Welcome, children," he called across the water. "Come. Join me for the end of the world."

CARTER

22. Friends in the Strangest Places

MENSHIKOV LOOKED LIKE HE'D SWUM through the Lake of Fire without a magic shield. His curly gray hair had been reduced to black stubble. His white suit was shredded and peppered with burn holes. His whole face was blistered, so his ruined eyes didn't seem out of place. As Bes might've said, Menshikov was wearing his ugly outfit.

The memory of Bes made me angry. Everything we'd gone through, everything we'd lost, was all Vlad Menshikov's fault.

The sun boat ground to a halt on the scarab-shell beach.

Ra warbled, "Hel-lo-o-o-o-o!" and stumbled to his feet. He began chasing a blue servant orb around the deck as if it were a pretty butterfly.

The demons dropped their shovels and assembled on the shore. They looked at each other uncertainly, no doubt wondering if this were some sort of clever trick. Surely this doddering old fool could not be the sun god.

"Wonderful," Menshikov said. "You brought Ra, after all."

It took me a moment to realize what was different about his voice. The gravelly breathing was gone. His tone was a deep, smooth baritone.

"I was worried," he continued. "You took so long in the Fourth House, I thought you'd be trapped for the night. We could have freed Lord Apophis without you, of course, but it would've been so inconvenient to hunt you down later. This is much better. Lord Apophis will be hungry when he wakes. He'll be most pleased that you brought him a snack."

"Wheee, snack," Ra giggled. He hobbled around the boat, trying to smash the servant light with his flail.

The demons began to laugh. Menshikov gave them an indulgent smile.

"Yes, quite amusing," he said. "My grandfather entertained Peter the Great with a dwarf wedding. I will do even better. I will entertain the Lord of Chaos himself with a senile sun god!"

The voice of Horus spoke urgently in my mind: *Take back the weapons of the pharaoh. This is your last chance!*

Deep inside, I knew it was a bad idea. If I claimed the weapons of the pharaoh now, I'd never return them. And the powers I'd gain wouldn't be enough to defeat Apophis. Still, I was tempted. It would feel so good to grab the crook and flail from that stupid old god Ra and smash Menshikov into the ground.

The Russian's eyes glittered with malice. "A rematch, Carter Kane? By all means. I notice you don't have your dwarf babysitter this time. Let's see what you can do on your own."

My vision turned red, and it had nothing to do with the light in the cavern. I stepped off the boat and summoned the hawk god's avatar. I'd never tried the spell so deep in the Duat before. I got more than I asked for. Instead of being encased in a glowing holograph, I felt myself growing taller and stronger. My eyesight grew sharper.

Sadie made a strangled sound. "Carter?"

"Large bird!" Ra said.

I looked down and found I was a flesh-and-blood giant, fifteen feet tall, dressed in the battle armor of Horus. I brought my enormous hands to my head and patted feathers instead of hair. My mouth was a razor-sharp beak. I shouted with elation, and it came out as a screech, echoing through the cavern. The demons scrambled back nervously. I looked down at Menshikov, who now seemed as insignificant as a mouse. I was ready to pulverize him, but Menshikov sneered and pointed his staff.

Whatever he was planning, Sadie was faster. She threw down her own staff, and it transformed into a kite (the bird of prey kind) as large as a pterodactyl.

Typical. I pull something really cool like morphing into a hawk warrior, and Sadie has to show me up. Her kite buffeted the air with its massive wings. Menshikov and his demons went somersaulting backward across the beach.

"Two large birds!" Ra started to clap.

"Carter, guard me!" Sadie pulled out the Book of Ra. "I need to start the spell."

I thought the giant kite was doing a pretty good job with guard duty, but I stepped forward and got ready to fight.

Menshikov rose to his feet. "By all means, Sadie Kane, start your little spell. Don't you understand? The spirit of Khepri *created* this prison. Ra gave part of his own soul, his ability to be reborn, to keep Apophis chained."

Sadie looked like he'd slapped her in the face. "'The last scarab—'"

"Exactly," Menshikov agreed. "All these scarabs were multiplied from one—Khepri, the third soul of Ra. My demons will find it eventually, digging through the shells. It's one of the only scarabs still alive now, and once we crush it, Apophis will be free. Even if you summon it back to Ra, Apophis will still be freed! Either way, Ra is too weak to fight. Apophis will devour him, as the ancient prophecies predicted, and Chaos will destroy Ma'at once and for all. You can't win."

"You're insane," I said, my voice much deeper than usual. "You'll be destroyed too."

I saw the fractured light in his eyes, and I realized something that shocked me to the core. Menshikov didn't want this any more than we did. He'd lived with grief and despair so long that Apophis had twisted his soul, made him a prisoner of his own hateful feelings. Vladimir Menshikov pretended to gloat, but he didn't feel any sense of triumph. Inside he was terrified, defeated, miserable. He was enslaved by Apophis. I almost felt sorry for him.

"We're already dead, Carter Kane," he said. "This place was never meant for humans. Don't you feel it? The power of Chaos is seeping into our bodies, withering our souls. But I have bigger plans. A *host* can live indefinitely, no matter what sickness he may have, no matter how injured he may be.

Apophis has already healed my voice. Soon I will be whole again. I will live forever!"

"A host…" When I realized what he meant, I almost lost control of my new giant form. "You're not serious. Menshikov, stop this before it's too late."

"And die?" he asked.

Behind me, a new voice said, "There are worse things than death, Vladimir."

I turned and saw a second boat gliding toward the shore —a small gray skiff with a single magic oar that rowed itself. The eye of Horus was painted on the boat's prow, and its lone passenger was Michel Desjardins. The Chief Lector's hair and beard were now white as snow. Glowing hieroglyphs floated from his cream-colored robes, making a trail of divine words behind him.

Desjardins stepped ashore. "You toy with something *much* worse than death, my old friend. Pray that I kill you before you succeed."

Of all the weird things I'd experienced that night, Desjardins stepping up to fight on *our* side was definitely the weirdest.

He walked between my giant hawk warrior and Sadie's mega-kite like they were no big deal, and planted his staff in the dead scarabs.

"Surrender, Vladimir."

Menshikov laughed. "Have you looked at yourself lately, my lord? My curses have been sapping your strength for months, and you didn't even realize it. You're nearly dead now. *I* am the most powerful magician in the world."

It was true that Desjardins didn't look good. His face was almost as gaunt and wrinkled as the sun god's. But the cloud of hieroglyphs seemed stronger around him. His eyes blazed with intensity, just as they had months ago in New Mexico, when he'd battled us in the streets of Las Cruces and vowed to destroy us. He took another step forward, and the mob of demons edged away. I suppose they recognized the leopard-skin cape around his shoulders as a mark of power.

"I have failed in many things," Desjardins admitted. "But I will not fail in this. I will *not* let you destroy the House of Life."

"The House?" Menshikov's voice turned shrill. "It died centuries ago! It should've been disbanded when Egypt fell." He kicked at the dried scarab shells. "The House has as much life as these hollow bug husks. Wake up, Michel! Egypt is gone, meaningless, ancient history. It's time to destroy the world and start anew. Chaos always wins."

"Not always." Desjardins turned to Sadie. "Begin your spell. I will deal with this wretch."

The ground surged under us, trembling as Apophis tried to rise.

"Think first, children," Menshikov warned. "The world will end no matter what you do. Mortals can't leave this cavern alive, but the two of you have been godlings. Combine with Horus and Isis again, pledge to serve Apophis, and you could survive this night. Desjardins has always been your enemy. Slay him for me now and present his body as a gift to Apophis! I will assure you both positions of honor in a new world ruled by Chaos, unrestricted by any rules. I can even give you the secret of curing Walt Stone."

He smiled at Sadie's stunned expression. "Yes, my girl. I *do* know how. The remedy was passed down for generations among the priests of Amun-Ra. Kill Desjardins, join Apophis, and the boy you love will be spared."

I'll be honest. His words were persuasive. I could imagine a new world where anything was possible, where no laws applied, not even the laws of physics, and we could be anything we wanted.

Chaos is impatient. It's random. And above all it's selfish. It tears down everything just for the

sake of change, feeding on itself in constant hunger. But Chaos can also be appealing. It tempts you to believe that nothing matters except what *you* want. And there was *so* much that I wanted. Menshikov's restored voice was smooth and confident, like Amos's tone whenever he used magic to persuade mortals.

That was the problem. Menshikov's promise was a trick. His words weren't even his own. They were being forced out of him. His eyes moved like they were reading a teleprompter. He spoke the will of Apophis, but when he finished he locked eyes with me, and just briefly I saw his real thoughts —a tortured plea he would've screamed if he had control of his own mouth: *Kill me now. Please.*

"I'm sorry, Menshikov," I said, and I sincerely meant it. "Magicians and gods have to stand together. The world may need fixing, but it's worth preserving. We won't let Chaos win."

Then a lot of things happened at once. Sadie opened her scroll and began to read. Menshikov screamed, "Attack!" and the demons rushed forward. The giant kite spread its wings, deflecting a blast of green fire from Menshikov's staff that probably would've incinerated Sadie on the spot. I charged to protect her, while Desjardins summoned a whirlwind around his body and flew toward Vlad Menshikov.

I waded through demons. I knocked over one with a razor-blade head, grabbed his ankles, and swung him around like a weapon, slicing his allies into piles of sand. Sadie's giant kite picked up two more in its claws and tossed them into the river.

Meanwhile Desjardins and Menshikov rose into the air, locked inside a tornado. They whirled around each other, firing blasts of fire, poison, and acid. Demons who got too close melted instantly.

In the midst of all this, Sadie read from the Book of Ra. I didn't know how she could concentrate, but her words rang out clear and loud. She invoked the dawn and the rise of a new day. Golden mist began to spread around her feet, weaving through the dried shells as if searching for life. The entire beach shuddered, and far underground, Apophis roared in outrage.

"Oh, noes!" Ra yelled behind me. "Vegetables!"

I turned and saw one of the largest demons boarding the sun boat, wicked knives in all four of his hands. Ra gave him the raspberry and scampered away, hiding behind his fiery throne.

I threw Razor-blade Head into a crowd of his friends, grabbed a spear from another demon, and threw it toward the boat.

If it had just been *me* throwing, my complete lack of long-shot skills might have caused me to impale the sun god, which would have been pretty embarrassing. Fortunately, my new giant form had aim worthy of Horus. The spear hit the four-armed demon square in the back. He dropped his knives, staggered to the edge of the boat, and fell into the River of Night.

Ra leaned over the side and gave him one last raspberry for good measure.

Desjardins' tornado still spun him around, locked in combat with Menshikov. I couldn't tell which magician had the upper hand. Sadie's kite was doing its best to protect her, impaling demons with its beak and crushing them in its huge claws. Somehow Sadie kept her concentration. The golden mist thickened as it spread over the beach.

The remaining demons began to pull back as Sadie spoke the last words of her spell: "'Khepri, the scarab who rises from death, the rebirth of Ra!'"

The Book of Ra vanished in a flash. The ground rumbled, and from the mass of dead shells, a single scarab rose into the air, a living golden beetle that floated toward Sadie and came to rest in her

hands.

Sadie smiled triumphantly. I almost dared to hope we'd won. Then hissing laughter filled the cavern. Desjardins lost control of his whirlwind, and the Chief Lector went flying toward the sun boat, slamming into the prow so hard he broke the rail and lay absolutely still.

Vladimir Menshikov dropped to the ground, landing in a crouch. Around his feet, the dead scarab shells dissolved, turning into bloodred sand.

"Brilliant," he said. "Brilliant, Sadie Kane!"

He stood, and all the magical energy in the cavern seemed to race toward his body—golden mist, red light, glowing hieroglyphs—all of it collapsing into Menshikov as if he'd taken on the gravity of a black hole.

His ruined eyes healed. His blistered face became smooth, young, and handsome. His white suit mended itself, then the fabric turned dark red. His skin rippled, and I realized with a chill that he was growing snake scales.

On the sun boat, Ra muttered, "Oh, noes. Need zebras."

The entire beach turned to red sand.

Menshikov held out his hand to my sister. "Give me the scarab, Sadie. I will have mercy on you. You and your brother will live. Walt will live."

Sadie clutched the scarab. I got ready to charge. Even in the body of a giant hawk warrior, I could feel the Chaos energy getting stronger and stronger, sapping my strength. Menshikov had warned us that no mortal could survive this cavern, and I believed him. We didn't have much time, but we had to stop Apophis. In the back of my mind, I accepted the fact that I would die. I was acting now for the sake of our friends, for the Kane family, for the whole mortal world.

"You want the scarab, Apophis?" Sadie's voice was full of loathing. "Then come and get it, you disgusting—" She called Apophis some words so bad, Gran would've washed her mouth out with soap for a year. [And no, Sadie, I'm not going to say them into the microphone.]

Menshikov stepped toward her. I picked up a shovel one of the demons had dropped. Sadie's giant kite flew at Menshikov, its talons poised to strike, but Menshikov flicked his hand like he was shooing away a fly. The monster dissolved into cloud of feathers.

"Do you take me for a god?" Menshikov roared.

As he focused on Sadie, I skirted behind him, doing my best to sneak closer—which is not easy when you're a fifteen-foot-tall birdman.

"I am Chaos itself!" Menshikov bellowed. "I will unknit your bones, dissolve your soul, and send you back to the primordial ooze you came from. Now, give me the scarab!"

"Tempting," Sadie said. "What do you think, Carter?"

Menshikov realized the trap too late. I lunged forward and hit him upside the head with the shovel. Menshikov crumpled. I body-slammed him into the sand, then stood up and stomped him in a little deeper. I buried him as best I could, then Sadie pointed at his burial site and spoke the glyph for fire. The sand melted, hardening into a coffin-size block of solid glass.

I would've spit on it, too, but I wasn't sure I could do that with a falcon beak.

The surviving demons did the sensible thing. They fled in panic. A few jumped into the river and let themselves dissolve, which was a real time-saver for us.

"That wasn't so hard," Sadie said, though I could tell the Chaos energy was starting to wear her down, too. Even when she was five and had pneumonia, I don't think she looked this bad.

"Hurry," I said. My adrenaline was fading quickly. My avatar form was starting to feel like an extra five hundred pounds of dead weight. "Get the scarab to Ra."

She nodded, and ran toward the sun boat; but she'd only made it halfway when Menshikov's glass grave blew up.

The most powerful explosive magic I'd ever seen was Sadie's *ha-di* spell. This blast was about fifty times more powerful.

A high-powered wave of sand and glass shards knocked me off my feet and shredded my avatar. Back in my regular body, blind and in pain, I crawled away from the laughing voice of Apophis.

"Where did you go, Sadie Kane?" Apophis called, his voice now as deep as a cannon shot. "Where is that bad little girl with my scarab?"

I blinked the sand out of my eyes. Vlad Menshikov—no, he might look like Vlad, but he was Apophis now—was about fifty feet away, stalking around the rim of the crater he'd made in the beach. He either didn't see me, or he assumed I was dead. He was looking for Sadie, but she was nowhere. The blast must've buried her in the sand, or worse.

My throat closed up. I wanted to get to my feet and tackle Apophis, but my body wouldn't work. My magic was depleted. The power of Chaos was sapping my life force. Just from being near Apophis I felt like I was coming undone—my brain synapses, my DNA, everything that made me Carter Kane was slowly dissolving.

Finally, Apophis spread his arms. "No matter. I'll dig your body up later. First, I'll deal with the old man."

For a second I thought he meant Desjardins, who was still crumpled lifelessly over the broken railing, but Apophis climbed into the boat, ignoring the Chief Lector, and approached the throne of fire.

"Hello, Ra," he said in a kindly voice. "It's been a long time."

A feeble voice from behind the chair said, "Can't play. Go away."

"Would you like a treat?" Apophis asked. "We used to play so nicely together. Every night, trying to kill each other. Don't you remember?"

Ra poked his bald head above the throne. "Treat?"

"How about a stuffed date?" Apophis pulled one out of the air. "You used to love stuffed dates, didn't you? All you have to do is come out and let me devour—I mean, entertain you."

"Want a cookie," Ra said.

"What kind?"

"Weasel cookie."

I'm here to tell you, that comment about weasel cookies probably saved the known universe.

Apophis stepped back, obviously confused by a comment that was even more chaotic than *he* was. And in that moment, Michel Desjardins struck.

The Chief Lector must have been playing dead, or maybe he just recovered quickly. He rose up and launched himself at Apophis, slamming him against the burning throne.

Menshikov screamed in his old raspy voice. Steam hissed like water on a barbecue. Desjardins' robes caught fire. Ra scrambled to the back of the boat and poked his crook in the air like that would make the bad men go away.

I struggled to my feet, but I still felt like I was carrying a few hundred extra pounds. Menshikov and Desjardins grappled with each other in front of the throne. This was the scene I'd witnessed in the Hall of Ages: the first moment in a new age.

I knew I should help, but I scrambled along the beach, trying to gauge the spot where I'd last seen Sadie. I fell to my knees and started to dig.

Desjardins and Menshikov struggled back and forth, shouting out words of power. I glanced over and saw a cloud of hieroglyphs and red light swirling around them as the Chief Lector summoned Ma'at, and Apophis just as quickly dissolved his spells with Chaos. As for Ra, the almighty sun god, he had scrambled to the stern of the boat and was cowering under the tiller.

I kept digging.

"Sadie," I muttered. "Come on. Where are you?"

Think, I told myself.

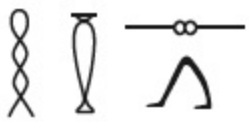
I closed my eyes. I thought about Sadie—every memory we'd shared since Christmas. We'd lived apart for years, but over the last three months, I'd become closer to her than to anyone else in the world. If she could figure out my secret name while I was unconscious, surely I could find her in a pile of sand.

I scrambled a few feet to the left and began to dig again. Immediately I scratched Sadie's nose. She groaned, which at least meant she was alive. I brushed off her face and she coughed. Then she raised her arms, and I pulled her out of the sand. I was so relieved, I almost sobbed; but being a macho guy and all, I didn't.

[Shut up, Sadie. I'm telling this part.]

Apophis and Desjardins were still fighting back and forth on the sun boat.

Desjardins yelled, *"Heh-sieh!"* and a hieroglyph blazed between them:



Apophis went flying off the boat like he'd been hooked by a moving train. He sailed right over us and landed in the sand about forty feet away.

"Nice one," Sadie muttered in a daze. "Glyph for *'Turn back.'"*

Desjardins staggered off the sun boat. His robes were still smoldering, but from his sleeve he pulled a ceramic statuette —a red snake carved with hieroglyphs.

Sadie gasped. "A *shabti* of Apophis? The penalty for making those is death!"

I could understand why. Images had power. In the wrong hands, they could strengthen or even summon the being they represented, and a statue of Apophis was way too dangerous to play with. But it was also a necessary ingredient for certain spells….

"An execration," I said. "He's trying to erase Apophis."

"That's impossible!" Sadie said. "He'll be destroyed!"

Desjardins began to chant. Hieroglyphs glowed in the air around him, swirling into a cone of protective power. Sadie tried to get to her feet, but she wasn't in much better shape than I was.

Apophis sat up. His face was a nightmare of burns from the throne of fire. He looked like a half-cooked hamburger patty someone had dropped in the sand. [Sadie says that's too gross. Well, I'm sorry. It's accurate.]

When he saw the statue in the Chief Lector's hands, he roared in outrage. "Are you insane, Michel? You can't execrate me!"

"Apophis," Desjardins chanted, "I name you Lord of Chaos, Serpent in the Dark, Fear of the Twelve Houses, the Hated One—"

"Stop it!" Apophis bellowed. "I cannot be contained!"

He shot a blast of fire at Desjardins, but the energy simply joined the swirling cloud around the Chief Lector, turning into the hieroglyph for "heat." Desjardins stumbled forward, aging before our eyes, becoming more stooped and frail, but his voice remained strong. "I speak for the gods. I speak for the House of Life. I am a servant of Ma'at. I cast you underfoot."

Desjardins threw down the red snake, and Apophis fell to his side.

The Lord of Chaos hurled everything he had at Desjardins —ice, poison, lightning, boulders—but nothing connected. They all simply turned into hieroglyphs in the Chief Lector's shield, Chaos forced into patterns of words—into the divine language of creation.

Desjardins smashed the ceramic snake under his foot. Apophis writhed in agony. The thing that used to be Vladimir Menshikov crumbled like a wax shell, and a creature rose out of it—a red snake, covered in slime like a new hatchling. It began to grow, its red scales glistening and its eyes glowing.

Its voice hissed in my mind: *I cannot be contained!*

But it was having trouble rising. The sand churned around it. A portal was opening, anchored on Apophis himself.

"I erase your name," Desjardins said. "I remove you from the memory of Egypt."

Apophis screamed. The beach imploded around him, swallowing the serpent and sucking the red sand into the vortex.

I grabbed Sadie and ran for the boat. Desjardins had collapsed to his knees in exhaustion, but somehow I managed to hook his arm and drag him to the shore. Together Sadie and I hauled him aboard the sun boat. Ra finally scrambled out from his hiding place under the tiller. The glowing servant lights manned the oars, and we pulled away as the entire beach sank into the dark waters, flashes of red lightning rippling under the surface.

Desjardins was dying.

The hieroglyphs had faded around him. His forehead was burning hot. His skin was as dry and thin as rice paper, and his voice was a ragged whisper.

"Execration w-won't last," he warned. "Only bought you some time."

I gripped his hand like he was an old friend, not a former enemy. After playing senet with the moon god, buying time wasn't something I took lightly. "Why did you do it?" I asked. "You used all your life force to banish him."

Desjardins smiled faintly. "Don't like you much. But you were right. The old ways…our only

chance. Tell Amos…tell Amos what happened." He clawed feebly at his leopard-skin cape, and I realized he wanted to remove it. I helped him, and he pressed the cape into my hands. "Show this to…the others.… Tell Amos…"

His eyes rolled into his head, and the Chief Lector passed. His body disintegrated into hieroglyphs—too many to read, the story of his entire life. Then the words floated away down the River of Night.

"Bye-bye," Ra muttered. "Weasels are sick."

I'd almost forgotten about the old god. He slumped in his throne again, resting his head on the loop of his crook and swatting his flail halfheartedly at the servant lights.

Sadie took a shaky breath. "Desjardins *saved* us. I—I didn't like him either, but—"

"I know," I said. "But we have to keep going. Do you still have the scarab?"

Sadie pulled the wriggling golden scarab from her pocket. Together we approached Ra.

"Take it," I told him.

Ra wrinkled his already wrinkled nose. "Don't want a bug."

"It's your soul!" Sadie snapped. "You'll take it, and you'll like it!"

Ra looked cowed. He took the beetle, and to my horror, popped it in his mouth.

"No!" Sadie yelped.

Too late. Ra had swallowed.

"Oh, god," Sadie said. "Was he supposed to do that? Maybe he was supposed to do that."

"Don't like bugs," Ra muttered.

We waited for him to change into a powerful youthful king. Instead, he burped. He stayed old, and weird, and disgusting.

In a daze, I walked with Sadie back to the front of the ship. We'd done everything we could, and yet I felt like we'd lost. As we sailed on, the magic pressure seemed to ease. The river appeared level, but I could sense we were rising rapidly through the Duat. Despite that, I still felt like my insides were melting. Sadie didn't look any better.

Menshikov's words echoed in my head: *Mortals can't leave this cavern alive.*

"It's Chaos sickness," Sadie said. "We're not going to make it, are we?"

"We have to hold on," I said. "At least until dawn."

"All that," Sadie said, "and what happened? We retrieved a senile god. We lost Bes and the Chief Lector. And we're dying."

I took Sadie's hand. "Maybe not. Look."

Ahead of us, the tunnel was getting brighter. The cavern walls dissolved, and the river widened. Two pillars rose from the water—two giant golden scarab statues. Beyond them gleamed the morning skyline of Manhattan. The River of Night was emptying out into New York Harbor.

"Each new dawn is a new world," I remembered our dad saying. "Maybe we'll be healed."

"Ra, too?" Sadie asked.

I didn't have an answer, but I was starting to feel better, stronger, like I'd had a good night's sleep. As we passed between the golden scarab statues, I looked to our right. Across the water,

smoke was rising from Brooklyn—flashes of multicolored light and streaks of fire as winged creatures engaged in aerial combat.

"They're still alive," Sadie said. "They need help!"

We turned the sun boat toward home—and sailed straight into battle.

SADIE

23. We Throw a Wild House Party

[FATAL MISTAKE, CARTER. Giving me the microphone at the most important part? You'll never get it back now. The end of the story is mine. Ha-ha-ha!]

Oh, that felt good. I'd be excellent at world domination.

But I digress.

You might've seen news reports about the strange double sunrise over Brooklyn on the morning of March twenty-first. There were many theories: haze in the air from pollution, a temperature drop in the lower atmosphere, aliens, or perhaps another sewer-gas leak causing mass hysteria. We love sewer gas in Brooklyn!

I can confirm, however, that there briefly *were* two suns in the sky. I know this because I was in one of them. The normal sun rose as usual. But there was also the boat of Ra, blazing as it rose from the Duat, out of New York Harbor and into the sky of the mortal world.

To observers below, the second sun appeared to merge with the light of the first. What actually happened? The sun boat dimmed as it descended toward Brooklyn House, where the mansion's antimortal camouflage shielding enveloped it, and made it seem to disappear.

The shielding was already working overtime, as a full-fledged war was in progress. Freak the Griffin was diving through the air, engaging the winged flaming snakes, the *uraei,* in aerial combat.

[I know that's a horrible word to pronounce, *uraei,* but Carter insists it's the plural for *uraeus,* and there's no arguing with him. Just say *you're right* and leave off the *t,* and you've got it.]

Freak yelled, "Freaaaak!" and gobbled up a *uraeus,* but he was sorely outnumbered. His fur was singed, and his buzzing wings must've been damaged, as he kept spinning in circles like a broken helicopter.

His rooftop nest was on fire. Our portal sphinx was broken, and the chimney was stained with a massive black star-burst where something or someone had exploded. A squad of enemy magicians and demons had taken cover behind the air conditioning unit and were pinned in combat against Zia and Walt, who were guarding the stairwell. Both sides threw fire, *shabti,* and glowing hieroglyphic bombs across the no-man's land of the roof.

As we descended over the enemy, old Ra (yes, he was still just as senile and withered as ever) leaned over the side and waved at everyone with his crook. "Hel-lo-o-o-o! Zebras!"

Both sides looked up in amazement. "Ra!" one demon screamed. Then everyone took up the cry: "Ra?" "Ra!" "Ra!"

They sounded like the world's most terrified pep squad.

The *uraei* stopped spitting fire, much to Freak's surprise, and immediately flew to the sun boat. They began circling us like an honor guard, and I remembered what Menshikov had said about them originally being creatures of Ra. Apparently they recognized their old master (emphasis on *old.)*

Most of the enemies below us scattered as the boat came down, but the slowest of the demons said, "Ra?" and looked up just as our sun boat landed on top of him with a satisfying *crunch.*

Carter and I jumped into battle. In spite of all we'd be through, I felt wonderful. The Chaos sickness had disappeared as soon as we'd risen from the Duat. My magic was strong. My spirits were high. If I'd just had a shower, some fresh clothes, and a proper cup of tea, I would've been in paradise. (Strike that; now that I'd seen Paradise, I didn't much like it. I'd settle for my own room.)

I zapped one demon into a tiger and unleashed him on his brethren. Carter popped into avatar form—the glowing golden kind, thank goodness; the three-meter-tall birdman had been a bit too scary for me. He smashed his way through the terrified enemy magicians, and with a sweep of his hand sent them sailing into the East River. Zia and Walt came out from the stairwell and helped us mop up the stragglers. Then they ran to us with big grins on their faces. They looked battered and bruised but still very much alive.

"FREEEEK!" said the griffin. He swooped down and landed next to Carter, head-butting his combat avatar, which I hoped was a sign of affection.

"Hey, buddy." Carter rubbed his head, careful to avoid the monster's chain-saw wings. "What's happening, guys?"

"Talking didn't work," Zia said drily.

"The enemy's been trying to break in all night," Walt said. "Amos and Bast have held them off, but—" He glanced at the sun boat, and his voice faltered. "Is that—that isn't—"

"Zebra!" Ra called, tottering toward us with a big toothless grin.

He walked straight up to Zia and pulled something out of his mouth—the glowing gold scarab, now quite wet but undigested. He offered it to her. "I like zebras."

Zia backed up. "This is—this is Ra, the Lord of the Sun? Why is he offering me a bug?"

"And what does he mean about zebras?" Walt asked.

Ra looked at Walt and clucked disapprovingly. "Weasels are sick."

Suddenly a chill went through me. My head spun as if the Chaos sickness was returning. In the back of mind, an idea started to form—something *very* important.

Zebras…Zia. Weasels… Walt.

Before I could think about this further, a large BOOM! shook the building. Chunks of limestone flew from the side of the mansion and rained down on the warehouse yard.

"They've breached the walls again!" Walt said. "Hurry!"

I consider myself fairly scattered and hyper, but the rest of the battle happened too fast even for *me* to keep track of. Ra absolutely refused to be parted from Zebra and Weasel (sorry, Zia and Walt), so we left him in their care at the sun boat while Freak lowered Carter and me to the deck below. We dropped from his claws onto the buffet table and found Bast whirling around with her knives in hand, slicing demons to sand and kicking magicians into the swimming pool, where our albino crocodile,

Philip of Macedonia, was only too happy to entertain them.

"Sadie!" she cried with relief. [Yes, Carter, she called *my* name instead of yours, but she's known me longer, after all.] She seemed to be having a great deal of fun, but her tone was urgent. "They've breached the east wall. Get inside!"

We ran through the doorway, dodging a random wombat that went flying over our heads—possibly someone's spell gone awry—and stepped into complete pandemonium.

"Holy Horus," Carter said.

In fact, Horus was about the only thing *not* doing battle in the Great Room. Khufu, our intrepid baboon, was riding an old magician around the room, choking him with his own wand and steering him into walls as the mage turned blue. Felix had unleashed a squad of penguins on another magician, who cowered in a magic circle with some sort of posttraumatic stress, screaming, "Not Antarctica again! Anything but that!" Alyssa was summoning the powers of Geb to repair a massive hole the enemy had blasted in the far wall. Julian had summoned a combat avatar for the first time, and was slicing demons with his glowing sword. Even bookish Cleo was dashing about the room, pulling scrolls from her pouch and reading random words of power like "Blind!" "Horizontal!" and "Gassy!" (which, by the way, work wonders to incapacitate an enemy). Everywhere I looked, our initiates were ruling the day. They fought as if they'd been waiting all night for the chance to strike, which I suppose was exactly the case. And there was Jaz—Jaz! Up and looking quite healthy!—knocking an enemy *shabti* straight into the fireplace, where it broke into a thousand pieces.

I felt an overwhelming sense of pride, and not a small amount of amazement. I'd been so worried about our young trainees' surviving, yet they were quite simply *dominating* a much more seasoned group of magicians.

Most impressive, though, was Amos. I'd seen him do magic, but never like this. He stood at the base of Thoth's statue, swirling his staff and summoning lightning and thunder, blasting enemy magicians, and flinging them away in miniature storm clouds. A woman magician charged at him, her staff glowing with red flames, but Amos simply tapped the floor. The marble tiles turned to sand at her feet, and the woman sank up to her neck.

Carter and I looked at each other, grinned, and joined the fight.

It was a complete rout. Soon the demons had been reduced to sand piles, and the enemy magicians began scattering in panic. No doubt they'd been expecting to fight a band of untrained children. They hadn't counted on the full Kane treatment.

One of the women managed to open a portal in the far wall.

Stop them, the voice of Isis spoke in my mind, which was quite a shock after such a long silence. *They must hear the truth.*

I don't know where I got the idea, but I raised my arms and shimmering rainbow wings appeared on either side of me—the wings of Isis.

I swept my arms. A blast of wind and multicolored light knocked our enemies off their feet, leaving our friends perfectly unharmed.

"Listen!" I bellowed.

Everyone fell silent. My voice normally sounds bossy, but now it seemed magnified by a factor of ten. The wings probably commanded attention as well.

"We're not your enemies!" I said. "I don't care if you like us, but the world has changed. You

need to hear what's happened."

My magic wings faded as I told everyone about our trip through the Duat, Ra's rebirth, Menshikov's betrayal, the rising of Apophis, and Desjardins' sacrifice to banish the Serpent.

"Lies!" An Asian man in charred blue robes stepped forward. From the vision Carter had described, I supposed that he was Kwai.

"It's true," Carter said. His avatar no longer surrounded him. His clothes had reverted to the normal mortal ones we'd bought him in Cairo, but somehow he still looked quite imposing, quite confident. He held up the leopard-skin cape of the Chief Lector, and I could feel a ripple of shock spread through the room.

"Desjardins fought at our side," Carter said. "He defeated Menshikov and execrated Apophis. He sacrificed his life to buy us a little time. But Apophis will be back. Desjardins wanted you to know. With his last words, he told me to show you this cape and explain the truth. Especially you, Amos. He wanted you to know—the path of gods has to be restored."

The enemy's escape portal was still swirling. No one had stepped through yet.

The woman who'd summoned it spit on our floor. She had white robes and spiky black hair. She shouted to her comrades, "What are you waiting for? They bring us the Chief Lector's cape and tell us this crazy story. They're Kanes! Traitors! They probably killed Desjardins and Menshikov themselves."

Amos's voice boomed across the Great Room: "Sarah Jacobi! You of all people know that isn't true. You've devoted your life to studying the ways of Chaos. You can *sense* the unleashing of Apophis, can't you? And the return of Ra."

Amos pointed out through the glass doors leading to the deck. I don't know how he sensed it without looking, but the sun boat was just floating down, coming to rest in Philip's swimming pool. It was quite an impressive landing. Zia and Walt stood on either side of the throne of fire. They'd managed to prop up Ra so that he looked a bit more regal with his crook and flail in his hands, though he still had a goofy grin on his face.

Bast, who'd been standing on the deck frozen in shock, fell to her knees. "My king!"

"Hel-llo-o-o-o-o," Ra warbled. "Goood-bye!"

I wasn't sure what he meant, but Bast shot to her feet, suddenly alarmed.

"He's going to rise into the heavens!" she said. "Walt, Zia, jump off!"

They did, just in time. The sun boat began to glow. Bast turned to me and called, "I'll escort him to the other gods! Don't worry. Back soon!" She jumped on board, and the sun boat floated into the sky, turning into a ball of fire. Then it blended with the sunlight and was gone.

"There is your proof," Amos announced. "The gods and the House of Life must work together. Sadie and Carter are right. The Serpent will not stay down for long, now that he has broken his chains. Who will join us?"

Several enemy magicians threw down their staffs and wands.

The woman in white, Sarah Jacobi, snarled, "The other nomes will never recognize your claim, Kane. You are tainted with the power of Set! We'll spread the word. We'll let them know you murdered Desjardins. They'll never follow you!"

She leaped through the portal. The man in blue, Kwai, studied us with contempt, then followed

Jacobi. Three others did as well, but we let them leave in peace.

Reverently, Amos took the leopard-skin cape from Carter's hands. "Poor Michel."

Everyone gathered around the statue of Thoth. For the first time, I realized how badly the Great Room had been damaged. Walls had been cracked, windows broken, relics smashed, and Amos's musical instruments half melted. For the second time in three months, we'd almost destroyed Brooklyn House. That had to be a record. And yet I wanted to give everyone in the room a huge hug.

"You all were brilliant," I said. "You destroyed the enemy in seconds! If you can fight so well, how were they able to keep you pinned down all night?"

"But we could barely keep them out!" Felix said. He looked mystified by his own success. "By dawn, I was, like, completely out of energy."

The others nodded grimly.

"And I was in a coma," said a familiar voice. Jaz pushed through the crowd and embraced Carter and me. It was so good to see her, I felt ridiculous that I'd ever been jealous of her and Walt.

"You're all right now?" I held her shoulders and studied her face for any sign of sickness, but she looked her usual bubbly self.

"I'm fine!" she said. "Right at dawn, I woke up feeling great. I guess as soon as you arrived…I don't know. Something happened."

"The power of Ra," Amos said. "When he rose, he brought new life, new energy to all of us. He revitalized our spirit. Without that, we would've failed."

I turned to Walt, not daring to ask. Was it possible he'd been cured as well? But the look in his eyes told me *that* prayer had not been answered. I suppose he could feel the pain in his limbs after doing so much magic.

Weasels are sick, Ra had often repeated. I wasn't sure why Ra was so interested in Walt's condition, but apparently it was beyond even the sun god's power to fix.

"Amos," Carter said, interrupting my thoughts, "what did Jacobi mean about the other nomes not recognizing your claim?"

I couldn't help it. I sighed and rolled my eyes at him. My brother can be quite thick sometimes.

"What?" he demanded.

"Carter," I said, "do you remember our talking about the most powerful magicians in the world? Desjardins was the first. Menshikov was the third. And you were worried about who the second might be?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "But—"

"And now that Desjardins is dead, the *second*-most powerful magician is the *most* powerful magician. And who do you think that is?"

Slowly, his brain cells must've fired, which is proof that miracles can happen. He turned to stare at Amos.

Our uncle nodded solemnly.

"I'm afraid so, children." Amos draped the leopard-skin cape around his shoulders. "Like it or not, the responsibility of leadership falls to me. I am the new Chief Lector."

SADIE

24. I Make an Impossible Promise

I DON'T LIKE GOOD-BYES, and yet I have to tell you about so many of them.

[No, Carter. That wasn't an invitation to take the microphone. Push off!]

By sunset, Brooklyn House was back in order. Alyssa took care of the masonry almost single-handedly with the power of the earth god. Our initiates knew the *hi-nehm* spell well enough to fix most of the other broken things. Khufu showed as much dexterity with rags and cleaning fluid as he did with a basketball, and it's truly amazing how much polishing, dusting, and scrubbing one can accomplish by attaching large dusting cloths to the wings of a griffin.

We had several meetings during the day. Philip of Macedonia kept guard in the pool, and our *shabti* army patrolled the grounds, but no one tried to attack—neither the forces of Apophis nor our fellow magicians. I could almost feel the collective shock spreading throughout the three hundred and sixty nomes as they learned the news: Desjardins was dead, Apophis had risen, Ra was back, and Amos Kane was the new Chief Lector. Which fact was most alarming to them, I didn't know, but I thought we'd have at least a little breathing space while the other nomes processed the turn of events and decided what to do.

Just before sunset, Carter and I were back on the roof as Zia opened a portal to Cairo for herself and Amos.

With her black hair freshly cut and a new set of beige robes, Zia looked like she hadn't changed a bit since we first spoke with her at the Metropolitan Museum, even though so much had happened since then. And I suppose, technically speaking, that hadn't been her at the museum at all, since it was her *shabti*.

[Yes, I know. Horribly confusing to keep track of all that. You should learn the spell for summoning headache medicine. It works wonders.]

The swirling gate appeared, and Zia turned to say her good-byes.

"I'll accompany Amos—I mean the Chief Lector—to the First Nome," she promised. "I'll make sure he is recognized as the leader of the House."

"They'll oppose you," I said. "Be careful."

Amos smiled. "We'll be fine. Don't worry."

He was dressed in his usual dapper style: a gold silk suit that matched his new leopard-skin cape, a porkpie hat, and gold beads in his braided hair. At his side sat a leather duffel bag and a saxophone case. I imagined him sitting on the steps of the pharaoh's throne, playing tenor sax—John Coltrane, perhaps—as a new age unfolded in purple light and glowing hieroglyphs popped out of his

horn.

"I'll keep in touch," he promised. "Besides, you have things well in hand here at Brooklyn House. You don't need a mentor anymore."

I tried to look brave, though I hated his leaving. Just because I was thirteen didn't mean I wanted adult responsibilities. Certainly I didn't want to run the Twenty-first Nome or lead armies into war. But I suppose no one who's put in such a position ever feels ready.

Zia put her hand on Carter's arm. He jumped as if she'd touched him with a defibrillator paddle.

"We'll talk soon," she said, "after…after things have settled. But, thank you."

Carter nodded, though he looked crestfallen. We all knew things wouldn't settle anytime soon. There was no guarantee we'd even live long enough to see Zia again.

"Take care of yourself," Carter said. "You've got an important role to play."

Zia glanced at me. A strange sort of understanding passed between us. I think she'd begun to have a suspicion, a deep-seated dread, about what her role might be. I can't say I understood it yet myself, but I shared her disquiet. *Zebras,* Ra had said. He'd woken up talking about zebras.

"If you need us," I said, "don't hesitate. I'll pop over and give those First Nome magicians a proper thrashing."

Amos kissed my forehead. He patted Carter on the shoulder. "You've both made me proud. You've given me hope for the first time in years."

I wanted them to stay longer. I wanted to talk with them a bit more. But my experience with Khonsu had taught me not to be greedy about time. It was best to appreciate what you had and not yearn for more.

Amos and Zia stepped through the portal and disappeared.

Just as the sun was setting, an exhausted-looking Bast appeared in the Great Room. Instead of her usual bodysuit, she wore a formal Egyptian dress and heavy jewelry that looked quite uncomfortable.

"I'd forgotten how hard it is riding the sun boat through the sky," she said, wiping her brow. "And *hot.* Next time, I'll bring a saucer and a cooler full of milk."

"Is Ra okay?" I asked.

The cat goddess pursed her lips. "Well…he's the same. I steered the boat to the throne room of the gods. They're getting a fresh crew ready for tonight's journey. But you should come see him before he leaves."

"Tonight's journey?" Carter asked. "Through the Duat? We just brought him back!"

Bast spread her hands. "What did you expect? You've restarted the ancient cycle. Ra will spend the days in the heavens and the nights on the river. The gods will have to guard him as they used to. Come on; we only have a few minutes."

I was about to ask how she planned on getting us to the gods' throne room. Bast had repeatedly told us she's no good at summoning portals. Then a door of pure shadow opened in the middle of the air. Anubis stepped through, looking annoyingly gorgeous as usual in his black jeans and leather jacket, with a white cotton shirt that hugged his chest so well I wondered if he was showing off on purpose. I suspected not. He probably rolled out of bed in the morning looking that perfect.

Right…that image did *not* help improve my concentration.

"Hello, Sadie," he said. [Yes, Carter. He addressed me first, too. What can I say? I'm just *that* important.]

I tried to look cross with him. "So it's you. Missed you in the underworld while we were gambling our *souls* away."

"Yes, I'm glad you survived," he said. "Your eulogy would've been hard to write."

"Oh, ha-ha. Where were you?"

Extra sadness crept into his brown eyes. "A side project," he said. "But right now, we should hurry."

He gestured toward the door of darkness. Just to show him I wasn't afraid, I marched through first.

On the other side, we found ourselves in the throne room of the gods. A crowd of assembled deities turned to face us. The palace seemed even grander than the last time we'd been there. The columns were taller, more intricately painted. The polished marble floor swirled with constellation designs, as if we were stepping across the galaxy. The ceiling blazed like one giant fluorescent panel. The dais and throne of Horus had been moved to one side, so it looked more like an observer's chair now, rather than the main event.

In the center of the room, the sun boat glowed in dry dock scaffolding. Its light-orb crew fluttered about, cleaning the hull and checking the rigging. *Uraei* circled the throne of fire, where Ra sat dressed in the raiment of an Egyptian king, his flail and crook in his lap. His chin was on his chest, and he snored loudly.

A muscular young man in leather armor stepped toward us. He had a shaven head and two different-colored eyes—one silver, one gold.

"Welcome, Carter and Sadie," Horus said. "We are honored."

His words didn't match his tone, which was stiff and formal. The other gods bowed respectfully to us, but I could feel their hostility simmering just below the surface. They were all dressed in their finest armor and looked quite imposing. Sobek the crocodile god (not my favorite) wore glittering green chain mail and carried a massive staff that flowed with water. Nekhbet looked about as cleaned-up as a vulture can, her feathered black cloak silky and plush. She inclined her head to me, but her eyes told me she still wanted to tear me apart. Babi the baboon god had gotten his teeth brushed and his fur combed. He was holding a rugby ball—possibly because Gramps had infected him with the obsession.

Khonsu stood in his glittery silver suit, tossing a coin in the air and smiling. I wanted to punch him, but he nodded as if we were old friends. Even Set was there, in his devilish red disco suit, leaning against a column at the back of the crowd, holding his black iron staff. I remembered that he'd promised not to kill me only until we freed Ra, but at the moment, he seemed relaxed. He tipped his hat and grinned at me as if enjoying my discomfort.

Thoth the knowledge god was the only one who hadn't dressed up. He wore his usual jeans and lab coat covered with scribbles. He studied me with his strange kaleidoscope eyes, and I got the feeling he was the only one in the room who actually pitied my discomfort.

Isis stepped forward. Her long black hair was braided down behind the shoulders of her gossamer dress. Her rainbow wings shimmered behind her. She bowed to me formally, but I could feel the waves of cold coming off her.

Horus turned to the assembled gods. I realized he was no longer wearing the pharaoh's crown.

"Behold!" he told the crowd. "Carter and Sadie Kane, who awakened our king! Let there be no doubt: Apophis the enemy has risen. We must unite behind Ra."

Ra muttered in his sleep, "Fish, cookie, weasel," then went back to snoring.

Horus cleared his throat. "I pledge my loyalty! I expect you all to do the same. I will protect Ra's boat as we pass through the Duat tonight. Each of you shall take turns with this duty until the sun god is…fully recovered."

He sounded absolutely unconvinced this would ever happen.

"We will find a way to defeat Apophis!" he said. "Now, celebrate the return of Ra! I embrace Carter Kane as a brother."

Music began to play, echoing through the halls. Ra, still on his throne on his boat, woke up and started clapping. He grinned as gods swirled around him, some in human form, some dissolving into wisps of cloud, flame, or light.

Isis took my hands. "I hope you know what you're doing, Sadie," she said in a frigid voice. "Our greatest enemy rises, and you have dethroned my son and made a senile god our leader."

"Give it a chance," I said, though my ankles felt like they were turning to butter.

Horus clasped Carter's shoulders. His words weren't any friendlier.

"I *am* your ally, Carter," Horus promised. "I will lend you my strength whenever you ask. You will revive the path of my magic in the House of Life, and we will fight together to destroy the Serpent. But make no mistake: you have cost me a throne. If your choice costs us the war, I swear my last act before Apophis swallows me will be to crush you like a gnat. And if it comes to pass that we win this war without Ra's help, if you have disgraced me for nothing, I swear that the death of Cleopatra and the curse of Akhenaton will look like nothing compared to the wrath I will visit on you and your family for all time. Do you understand?"

To Carter's credit, he held up under the gaze of the war god.

"Just do your part," Carter said.

Horus laughed for the audience as if he and Carter had just shared a good joke. "Go now, Carter. See what your victory has cost. Let us hope all your allies do not share such a fate."

Horus turned his back on us and joined the celebration. Isis smiled at me one last time and dissolved into a sparkling rainbow.

Bast stood at my side, holding her tongue, but she looked as if she wanted to shred Horus like a scratching post.

Anubis looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Sadie. The gods can be—"

"Ungrateful?" I asked. "Infuriating?"

His face flushed. I supposed he thought I was referring to him.

"We can be slow to realize what is important," he said at last. "Sometimes, it takes us a while to appreciate something new, something that might change us for the better."

He fixed me with those warm eyes, and I wanted to melt into a puddle.

"We should go," Bast interrupted. "One more stop, if you're up for it."

"The cost of victory," Carter remembered. "Bes? Is he alive?"

Bast sighed. “Difficult question. This way.”

The last place I wanted to see again was Sunny Acres.

Nothing much had changed in the nursing home. No renewing sunlight had helped the senile gods. They were still wheeling their IV poles around, banging into walls, singing ancient hymns as they searched in vain for temples that no longer existed.

A new patient had joined them. Bes sat in a hospital gown in a wicker chair, gazing out the window at the Lake of Fire.

Tawaret knelt at his side, her tiny hippo eyes red from crying. She was trying to get him to drink from a glass.

Water dribbled down his chin. He gazed blankly at the fiery waterfall in the distance, his craggy face awash in red light. His curly hair was newly combed, and he wore a fresh blue Hawaiian shirt and shorts, so he looked quite comfortable. But his brow was furrowed. His fingers gripped the armrests, as if he knew he should remember something, but couldn’t.

“That’s all right, Bes.” Tawaret’s voice quivered as she dabbed a napkin under his chin. “We’ll work on it. I’ll take care of you.”

Then she noticed us. Her expression hardened. For a kindly goddess of childbirth, Tawaret could look quite scary when she wanted to.

She patted the dwarf god’s knee. “I’ll be right back, dear Bes.”

She stood, which was quite an accomplishment with her swollen belly, and steered us away from his chair. “How dare you come here! As if you haven’t done enough!”

I was about to break into tears and apologize when I realized her anger wasn’t aimed at Carter or me. She was glaring at Bast.

“Tawaret…” Bast turned up her palms. “I didn’t want this. He was my friend.”

“He was one of your cat toys!” Tawaret shouted so loudly, a few of the patients started crying. “You’re as selfish as *all* your kind, Bast. You used him and discarded him. You *knew* he loved you, and took advantage of it. You played with him like a mouse under your paw.”

“That’s not fair,” Bast murmured, but her hair started to puff up as it does when she’s scared. I couldn’t blame her. There’s almost nothing more frightening than an enraged hippo.

Tawaret stomped her foot so hard, her high heel broke. “Bes deserved better than this. He deserved better than *you*. He had a good heart. I—I never forgot him!”

I sensed a very violent, one-sided cat–hippo fight about to begin. I don’t know if I spoke up to save Bast, or to spare the traumatized patients, or to assuage my own guilt, but I stepped between the goddesses. “We’ll fix this,” I blurted out. “Tawaret, I swear on my life. We will find a way to heal Bes.”

She looked at me, and the anger drained from her eyes until there was nothing left but pity. “Child, oh child…I know you mean well. But don’t give me false hope. I’ve lived with false hopes too long. Go—see him if you must. See what’s happened to the best dwarf in the world. Then leave us alone. Don’t promise me what can’t happen.”

She turned and hobbled on her broken shoe to the nurses’ desk. Bast lowered her head. She wore a very uncatlike expression: shame.

"I'll wait here," she announced.

I could tell that was her final answer, so Carter and I approached Bes by ourselves.

The dwarf god hadn't moved. He sat in his wicker chair, his mouth slightly open, his eyes fixed on the Lake of Fire.

"Bes." I put my hand on his arm. "Can you hear me?"

He didn't answer, of course. He wore a bracelet on his wrist with his name written in hieroglyphs, lovingly decorated, probably by Tawaret herself.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "We'll get your *ren* back. We'll find a way to heal you. Won't we, Carter?"

"Yeah." He cleared his throat, and I can assure you he was *not* acting very macho at that moment. "Yeah, I swear it, Bes. If it's…"

He was probably going to say *if it's the last thing we do,* but he wisely decided against it. Given the impending war with Apophis, it was best not to think about how soon our lives might end.

I leaned down and kissed Bes's forehead. I remembered how we'd met at Waterloo Station, when he'd chauffeured Liz and Emma and me to safety. I remembered how he'd scared away Nekhbet and Babi in his ridiculous Speedo. I thought about the silly chocolate Lenin head he'd bought in St. Petersburg, and how he'd pulled Walt and me to safety from the portal at Red Sands. I couldn't think of him as *small.* He had an enormous, colorful, ludicrous, wonderful personality—and it seemed impossible that it was gone forever. He'd given his immortal life to buy us one extra hour.

I couldn't help sobbing. Finally Carter had to pull me away. I don't remember how we got back home, but I remember feeling as if we were falling rather than ascending—as if the mortal world had become a deeper and sadder place than anywhere in the Duat.

That evening I sat alone on my bed with the windows open. The first night of spring had turned surprisingly warm and pleasant. Lights glittered along the riverfront. The neighborhood bagel factory filled the air with the scent of baking bread. I was listening to my SAD playlist and wondering how it was possible that my birthday had been only a few days ago.

The world had changed. The sun god had returned. Apophis was free from his cage, and although he'd been banished to some deep part of the abyss, he'd be working his way back very quickly. War was coming. We had so much work to do. Yet I was sitting here, listening to the same songs as before, staring at my poster of Anubis and feeling helplessly conflicted about something as trivial and infuriating as…yes, you guessed it. *Boys.*

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," I said without much enthusiasm. I assumed it was Carter. We often chatted at the end of the day, just to debrief. Instead, it was Walt, and suddenly I was very aware that I was wearing a ratty old T-shirt and pajama bottoms. My hair no doubt looked as horrible as Nekhbet's. Carter's seeing me this way wouldn't be a problem. But Walt? Bad.

"What are you doing here?" I yelped, a bit too loudly.

He blinked, obviously surprised by my lack of hospitality. "Sorry, I'll go."

"No! I mean…that's all right. You just surprised me. And —you know…we have rules about boys' being in the girls' rooms without, um, supervision."

I realize that sounded terribly stodgy of me, almost Carteresque. But I was nervous.

Walt folded his arms. They were very nice arms. He was wearing his basketball jersey and running shorts, his usual collection of amulets around his neck. He looked so healthy, so athletic, it was difficult to believe he was dying of an ancient curse.

"Well, you're the instructor," he said. "Can you supervise me?"

No doubt I was blushing horribly. "Right. I suppose if you leave the door ajar…Er, what brings you here?"

He leaned against the closet door. With some horror, I realized it was still open, revealing my poster of Anubis.

"There's so much going on," Walt said. "You've got enough to worry about. I don't want you worrying about me as well."

"Too late," I admitted.

He nodded, as if he shared my frustration. "That day in the desert, at Bahariya…would you think I'm crazy if I tell you that was the best day of my life?"

My heart fluttered, but I tried to stay calm. "Well, Egyptian public transportation, roadside bandits, smelly camels, psychotic Roman mummies, and possessed date farmers… Gosh, it was quite a day."

"And you," he said.

"Yes, well…I suppose I belong in that list of catastrophes."

"That's not what I meant."

I was feeling like quite a bad supervisor—nervous and confused, and having very un-supervisory thoughts. My eyes strayed to the closet door. Walt noticed.

"Oh." He pointed to Anubis. "You want me to close this?"

"Yes," I said. "No. Possibly. I mean, it doesn't matter. Well, not that it *doesn't* matter, but—"

Walt laughed as if my discomfort didn't bother him at all. "Sadie, look. I just wanted to say, whatever happens, I'm glad I met you. I'm glad I came to Brooklyn. Jaz is working on a cure for me. Maybe she'll find something, but either way…it's okay."

"It's *not* okay!" I think my anger surprised me more than it did him. "Walt, you're dying of a bloody curse. And—and I had Menshikov *right there,* ready to tell me the cure, and…I failed you. Like I failed Bes. I didn't even bring back Ra properly."

I was furious with myself for crying, but I couldn't help it. Walt came over and sat next to me. He didn't try to put his arm around me, which was just as well. I was already confused enough.

"You didn't fail me," he said. "You didn't fail anybody. You did what was right, and that takes sacrifice."

"Not you," I said. "I don't want you to die."

His smile made me feel as if the world had been reduced to just two people.

"Ra's return may not have cured me," he said, "but it still gave me new hope. You're amazing, Sadie. One way or another, we're going to make this work. I'm not leaving you."

That sounded so good, so excellent, and so impossible. "How can you promise that?"

He eyes drifted to the picture of Anubis, then back to me. "Just try not to worry about me. We

have to concentrate on defeating Apophis."

"Any idea how?"

He gestured toward my bedside table, where my beaten-up old tape recorder sat—a gift from my grandparents ages ago.

"Tell people what really happened," he said. "Don't let Jacobi and the others spread lies about your family. I came to Brooklyn because I got your first message—the recording about the Red Pyramid, the *djed* amulet. You asked for help, and we answered. It's time to ask for help again."

"But how many magicians did we really reach the first time —twenty?"

"Hey, we did pretty well last night." Walt held my eyes. I thought he might kiss me, but something made us both hesitate—a sense that it would only make things more uncertain, more fragile. "Send out another tape, Sadie. Just tell the truth. When you talk…" He shrugged, and then stood to leave. "Well, you're pretty hard to ignore."

A few moments after he left, Carter came in, a book tucked under his arm. He found me listening to my sad music, staring at the tape recorder on the dresser.

"Was that Walt coming out of your room?" he asked. A little brotherly protectiveness crept into his voice. "What's up?"

"Oh, just…" My eyes fixed on the book he was carrying. It was a tattered old textbook, and I wondered if he meant to assign me some sort of homework. But the cover looked *so* familiar: the diamond design, the multicolored foil letters. "What is that?"

Carter sat next to me. Nervously, he offered me the book. "It's, um…not a gold necklace. Or even a magic knife. But I told you I had a birthday present for you. This—this is it."

I ran my fingers over the title: *Blackley's Survey of the Sciences for First-Year College, Twelfth Edition.* Then I opened the book. On the inside cover, a name was written in lovely cursive: *Ruby Kane.*

It was Mum's college textbook—the same one she used to read to us from at bedtime. The very same copy.

I blinked back tears. "How did you—"

"The retrieval *shabti* in the library," Carter said. "They can find any book. I know it's…kind of a lame present. It didn't cost me anything, and I didn't make it, but—"

"Shut up, you idiot!" I flung my arms around him. "It's an amazing birthday present. And you're an amazing brother!"

[Fine, Carter. There it is, recorded for all time. Just don't get a big head. I spoke in a moment of weakness.]

We turned the pages, smiling at the crayon mustache Carter had drawn on Isaac Newton and the outdated diagrams of the solar system. We found an old food stain that was probably my applesauce. I *loved* applesauce. We ran our hands over the margin notes done in Mum's beautiful cursive.

I felt closer to my mother just holding the book, and amazed by Carter's thoughtfulness. Even though I'd learned his secret name and supposed I knew everything about him, the boy had still managed to surprise me.

"So, what were you saying about Walt?" he asked. "What's going on?"

Reluctantly, I closed *Blackley's Survey of the Sciences.* And yes, that's probably the only time in

my life I'd ever closed a textbook with reluctance. I rose and set the book on my dresser. Then I picked up my old cassette recorder.

"We have work to do," I told Carter. I tossed him the microphone.

So now you know what really happened on the equinox, how the old Chief Lector died, and how Amos took his place. Desjardins sacrificed his life to buy us time, but Apophis is quickly working his way out of the abyss. We may have weeks, if we're lucky. Days, if we're not.

Amos is trying to assert himself as the leader of the House of Life, but it's not going to be easy. Some nomes are in rebellion. Many believe the Kanes have taken over by force.

We're sending out this tape to set the record straight.

We don't have all the answers yet. We don't know when or where Apophis will strike. We don't know how to heal Ra, or Bes, or even Walt. We don't know what role Zia will play, or if the gods can be trusted to help us. Most important, I am completely torn between two amazing guys—one who's dying and another who's the god of death. What sort of choice is that, I ask you?

[Right, sorry…getting off track again.]

The point is, wherever you are, whatever type of magic you practice, we need your help. Unless we unite and learn the path of the gods quickly, we don't stand a chance.

I hope Walt is right and you'll find me hard to ignore, because the clock is ticking. We'll keep a room ready for you at Brooklyn House.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Before publishing such an alarming transcript, I felt compelled to do some fact-checking on Sadie and Carter's story. I wish I could tell you they had made all this up. Unfortunately, it appears that much of what they have reported is based on fact.

The Egyptian relics and locations they mention in America, England, Russia, and Egypt do exist. Prince Menshikov's Palace in St. Petersburg is real, and the story of the dwarf wedding is true, though I can find no mention that one of the dwarves might have been a god, or that the prince had a grandson named Vladimir.

All the Egyptian gods and monsters Carter and Sadie met are attested to in ancient sources. Many different accounts survive of Ra's nightly journey through the Duat, and while the stories vary greatly, Carter and Sadie's account closely fits what we know from Egyptian mythology.

In short, I believe they might be telling the truth. Their call for help is genuine. Should further audio recordings fall into my hands, I will relay the information; but if Apophis truly is rising, there may no opportunity. For the sake of the entire world, I hope I'm wrong.

BOOK THREE

THE SERPENT'S SHADOW

RICK RIORDAN

Disney • Hyperion Books
New York

To three great editors who shaped my writing career: Kate Miciak, Jennifer Besser, and Stephanie Lurie—the magicians who have brought my words to life

WARNING

This is a transcript of an audio recording. Twice before, Carter and Sadie Kane have sent me such recordings, which I transcribed as The Red Pyramid *and* The Throne of Fire. *While I'm honored by the Kanes' continued trust, I must advise you that this third account is their most troubling yet. The tape arrived at my home in a charred box perforated with claw and teeth marks that my local zoologist could not identify. Had it not been for the protective hieroglyphs on the exterior, I doubt the box would have survived its journey. Read on, and you will understand why.*

SADIE

1. We Crash and Burn a Party

SADIE KANE HERE.

If you're listening to this, congratulations! You survived Doomsday.

I'd like to apologize straightaway for any inconvenience the end of the world may have caused you. The earthquakes, rebellions, riots, tornadoes, floods, tsunamis, and of course the giant snake who swallowed the sun—I'm afraid most of that was our fault. Carter and I decided we should at least explain how it happened.

This will probably be our last recording. By the time you've heard our story, the reason for that will be obvious.

Our problems started in Dallas, when the fire-breathing sheep destroyed the King Tut exhibit.

That night the Texas magicians were hosting a party in the sculpture garden across the street from the Dallas Museum of Art. The men wore tuxedos and cowboy boots. The women wore evening dresses and hairdos like explosions of candy floss.

(Carter says it's called cotton candy in America. I don't care. I was raised in London, so you'll just have to keep up and learn the proper way of saying things.)

A band played old-timey country music on the pavilion. Strings of fairy lights glimmered in the trees. Magicians did occasionally pop out of secret doors in the sculptures or summon sparks of fire to burn away pesky mosquitoes, but otherwise it seemed like quite a normal party.

The leader of the Fifty-first Nome, JD Grissom, was chatting with his guests and enjoying a plate of beef tacos when we pulled him away for an emergency meeting. I felt bad about that, but there wasn't much choice, considering the danger he was in.

"An attack?" He frowned. "The Tut exhibit has been open for a month now. If Apophis was going to strike, wouldn't he have done it already?"

JD was tall and stout, with a rugged, weathered face, feathery red hair, and hands as rough as bark. He looked about forty, but it's hard to tell with magicians. He might have been four hundred. He wore a black suit with a bolo tie and a large silver Lone Star belt buckle, like a Wild West marshal.

"Let's talk on the way," Carter said. He started leading us toward the opposite side of the garden.

I must admit my brother acted remarkably confident.

He was still a monumental dork, of course. His nappy brown hair had a chunk missing on the left side where his griffin had given him a "love bite," and you could tell from the nicks on his face that

he hadn't quite mastered the art of shaving. But since his fifteenth birthday he'd shot up in height and put on muscle from hours of combat training. He looked poised and mature in his black linen clothes, especially with that *khopesh* sword at his side. I could almost imagine him as a leader of men without laughing hysterically.

[Why are you glaring at me, Carter? That was quite a generous description.]

Carter maneuvered around the buffet table, grabbing a handful of tortilla chips. "Apophis has a pattern," he told JD. "The other attacks all happened on the night of the new moon, when darkness is greatest. Believe me, he'll hit your museum tonight. And he'll hit it hard."

JD Grissom squeezed around a cluster of magicians drinking champagne. "These other attacks…" he said. "You mean Chicago and Mexico City?"

"And Toronto," Carter said. "And…a few others."

I knew he didn't want to say more. The attacks we'd witnessed over the summer had left us both with nightmares.

True, full-out Armageddon hadn't come yet. It had been six months since the Chaos snake Apophis had escaped from his Underworld prison, but he still hadn't launched a large-scale invasion of the mortal world as we'd expected. For some reason, the serpent was biding his time, settling for smaller attacks on nomes that seemed secure and happy.

Like this one, I thought.

As we passed the pavilion, the band finished their song. A pretty blond woman with a fiddle waved her bow at JD.

"Come on, sweetie!" she called. "We need you on steel guitar!"

He forced a smile. "Soon, hon. I'll be back."

We walked on. JD turned to us. "My wife, Anne."

"Is she also a magician?" I asked.

He nodded, his expression turning dark. "These attacks. Why are you so sure Apophis will strike *here*?"

Carter's mouth was full of tortilla chips, so his response was, "Mhm-hmm."

"He's after a certain artifact," I translated. "He's already destroyed five copies of it. The last one in existence happens to be in your Tut exhibit."

"Which artifact?" JD asked.

I hesitated. Before coming to Dallas, we'd cast all sorts of shielding spells and loaded up on protective amulets to prevent magical eavesdropping, but I was still nervous about speaking our plans aloud.

"Better we show you." I stepped around a fountain, where two young magicians were tracing glowing *I Love You* messages on the paving stones with their wands. "We've brought our own crack team to help. They're waiting at the museum. If you'll let us examine the artifact, possibly take it with us for safekeeping—"

"Take it *with* you?" JD scowled. "The exhibit is heavily guarded. I have my best magicians surrounding it night and day. You think you can do better at Brooklyn House?"

We stopped at the edge of the garden. Across the street, a two-story-tall King Tut banner hung from the side of the museum.

Carter took out his mobile phone. He showed JD Grissom an image on the screen—a burned-out mansion that had once been the headquarters for the One Hundredth Nome in Toronto.

"I'm sure your guards are good," Carter said. "But we'd rather not make your nome a target for Apophis. In the other attacks like this one…the serpent's minions didn't leave any survivors."

JD stared at the phone's screen, then glanced back at his wife, Anne, who was fiddling her way through a two-step.

"Fine," JD said. "I hope your team is top-notch."

"They're amazing," I promised. "Come on, we'll introduce you."

Our crack squad of magicians was busy raiding the gift shop.

Felix had summoned three penguins, which were waddling around wearing paper King Tut masks. Our baboon friend, Khufu, sat atop a bookshelf reading *The History of the Pharaohs*, which would've been quite impressive except he was holding the book upside down. Walt—oh, dear Walt, *why?*—had opened the jewelry cabinet and was examining charm bracelets and necklaces as if they might be magical. Alyssa levitated clay pots with her earth elemental magic, juggling twenty or thirty at a time in a figure eight.

Carter cleared his throat.

Walt froze, his hands full of gold jewelry. Khufu scrambled down the bookshelf, knocking off most of the books. Alyssa's pottery crashed to the floor. Felix tried to shoo his penguins behind the till. (He does have rather strong feelings about the usefulness of penguins. I'm afraid I can't explain it.)

JD Grissom drummed his fingers against his Lone Star belt buckle. "This is your amazing team?"

"Yes!" I tried for a winning smile. "Sorry about the mess. I'll just, um…"

I pulled my wand from my belt and spoke a word of power: *"Hi-nehm!"*

I'd got better at such spells. Most of the time, I could now channel power from my patron goddess Isis without passing out. And I hadn't exploded once.

The hieroglyph for *Join together* glowed briefly in the air:

Broken bits of pottery flew back together and mended themselves. Books returned to the shelf. The King Tut masks flew off the penguins, revealing them to be—gasp—penguins.

Our friends looked rather embarrassed.

"Sorry," Walt mumbled, putting the jewelry back in the case. "We got bored."

I couldn't stay mad at Walt. He was tall and athletic, built like a basketball player, in workout pants and sleeveless tee that showed off his sculpted arms. His skin was the color of hot cocoa, his face every bit as regal and handsome as the statues of his pharaoh ancestors.

Did I fancy him? Well, it's complicated. More on that later.

JD Grissom looked over our team.

"Nice to meet you all." He managed to contain his enthusiasm. "Come with me."

The museum's main foyer was a vast white room with empty café tables, a stage, and a ceiling high enough for a pet giraffe. On one side, stairs led up to a balcony with a row of offices. On the other side, glass walls looked out at the nighttime skyline of Dallas.

JD pointed up at the balcony, where two men in black linen robes were patrolling. "You see? Guards are everywhere."

The men had their staffs and wands ready. They glanced down at us, and I noticed their eyes were glowing. Hieroglyphs were painted on their cheekbones like war paint.

Alyssa whispered to me: "What's up with their eyes?"

"Surveillance magic," I guessed. "The symbols allow the guards to see into the Duat."

Alyssa bit her lip. Since her patron was the earth god Geb, she liked solid things, such as stone and clay. She didn't like heights or deep water. She *definitely* didn't like the idea of the Duat—the magical realm that coexisted with ours.

Once, when I'd described the Duat as an ocean under our feet with layers and layers of magical dimensions going down forever, I thought Alyssa was going to get seasick.

Ten-year-old Felix, on the other hand, had no such qualms. "Cool!" he said. "I want glowing eyes."

He traced his finger across his cheeks, leaving shiny purple blobs in the shape of Antarctica.

Alyssa laughed. "Can you see into the Duat now?"

"No," he admitted. "But I can see my penguins much better."

"We should hurry," Carter reminded us. "Apophis usually strikes when the moon is at the top of its transit. Which is—"

"Agh!" Khufu held up all ten fingers. Leave it to a baboon to have perfect astronomical sense.

"In ten minutes," I said. "Just brilliant."

We approached the entrance of the King Tut exhibit, which was rather hard to miss because of the giant golden sign that read KING TUT EXHIBIT. Two magicians stood guard with full-grown leopards on leashes.

Carter looked at JD in astonishment. "How did you get complete access to the museum?"

The Texan shrugged. "My wife, Anne, is president of the board. Now, which artifact did you want to see?"

"I studied your exhibit maps," Carter said. "Come on. I'll show you."

The leopards seemed quite interested in Felix's penguins, but the guards held them back and let us pass.

Inside, the exhibit was extensive, but I doubt you care about the details. A labyrinth of rooms with sarcophagi, statues, furniture, bits of gold jewelry—blah, blah, blah. I would have passed it all by. I've seen enough Egyptian collections to last several lifetimes, thank you very much.

Besides, everywhere I looked, I saw reminders of bad experiences.

We passed cases of *shabti* figurines, no doubt enchanted to come to life when called upon. I'd killed my share of those. We passed statues of glowering monsters and gods whom I'd fought in person—the vulture Nekhbet, who'd once possessed my Gran (long story); the crocodile Sobek, who'd tried to kill my cat (longer story); and the lion goddess Sekhmet, whom we'd once vanquished

with hot sauce (don't even ask).

Most upsetting of all: a small alabaster statue of our friend Bes, the dwarf god. The carving was eons old, but I recognized that pug nose, the bushy sideburns, the potbelly, and the endearingly ugly face that looked as if it had been hit repeatedly with a frying pan. We'd only known Bes for a few days, but he'd literally sacrificed his soul to help us. Now, each time I saw him I was reminded of a debt I could never repay.

I must have lingered at his statue longer than I realized. The rest of the group had passed me and were turning into the next room, about twenty meters ahead, when a voice next to me said, "Psst!"

I looked around. I thought the statue of Bes might have spoken. Then the voice called again: "Hey, doll. Listen up. Not much time."

In the middle of the wall, eye-level with me, a man's face bulged from the white, textured paint as if trying to break through. He had a beak of a nose, cruel thin lips, and a high forehead. Though he was the same color as the wall, he seemed very much alive. His blank eyes managed to convey a look of impatience.

"You won't save the scroll, doll," he warned. "Even if you did, you'd never understand it. You need my help."

I'd experienced many strange things since I'd begun practicing magic, so I wasn't particularly startled. Still, I knew better than to trust any old white-spackled apparition who spoke to me, especially one who called me *doll*. He reminded me of a character from those silly Mafia movies the boys at Brooklyn House liked to watch in their spare time—someone's Uncle Vinnie, perhaps.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

The man snorted. "Like you don't know. Like there's *anybody* who doesn't know. You've got two days until they put me down. You want to defeat Apophis, you'd better pull some strings and get me out of here."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said.

The man didn't sound like Set the god of evil, or the serpent Apophis, or any of the other villains I'd dealt with before, but one could never be sure. There was this thing called *magic*, after all.

The man jutted out his chin. "Okay, I get it. You want a show of faith. You'll never save the scroll, but go for the golden box. That'll give you a clue about what you need, if you're smart enough to understand it. Day after tomorrow at sunset, doll. Then my offer expires, 'cause that's when *I* get permanently—"

He choked. His eyes widened. He strained as if a noose were tightening around his neck. He slowly melted back into the wall.

"Sadie?" Walt called from the end of the corridor. "You okay?"

I looked over. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" he asked.

Of course not, I thought. What fun would it be if other people saw my vision of Uncle Vinnie? Then I couldn't wonder if I were going stark raving mad.

"Nothing," I said, and I ran to catch up.

The entrance to the next room was flanked by two giant obsidian sphinxes with the bodies of lions

and the heads of rams. Carter says that particular type of sphinx is called a *criosphinx*. [Thanks, Carter. We were all dying to know that bit of useless information.]

"Agh!" Khufu warned, holding up five fingers.

"Five minutes left," Carter translated.

"Give me a moment," JD said. "This room has the heaviest protective spells. I'll need to modify them to let you through."

"Uh," I said nervously, "but the spells will still keep out enemies, like giant Chaos snakes, I hope?"

JD gave me an exasperated look, which I tend to get a lot.

"I *do* know a thing or two about protective magic," he promised. "Trust me." He raised his wand and began to chant.

Carter pulled me aside. "You okay?"

I must have looked shaken from my encounter with Uncle Vinnie. "I'm fine," I said. "Saw something back there. Probably just one of Apophis's tricks, but…"

My eyes drifted to the other end of the corridor. Walt was staring at a golden throne in a glass case. He leaned forward with one hand on the glass as if he might be sick.

"Hold that thought," I told Carter.

I moved to Walt's side. Light from the exhibit bathed his face, turning his features reddish brown like the hills of Egypt.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Tutankhamen died in that chair," he said.

I read the display card. It didn't say anything about Tut dying in the chair, but Walt sounded very sure. Perhaps he could sense the family curse. King Tut was Walt's great-times-a-billion granduncle, and the same genetic poison that killed Tut at nineteen was now coursing through Walt's bloodstream, getting stronger the more he practiced magic. Yet Walt refused to slow down. Looking at the throne of his ancestor, he must have felt as if he were reading his own obituary.

"We'll find a cure," I promised. "As soon as we deal with Apophis…"

He looked at me, and my voice faltered. We both knew our chances of defeating Apophis were slim. Even if we succeeded, there was no guarantee Walt would live long enough to enjoy the victory. Today was one of Walt's *good* days, and still I could see the pain in his eyes.

"Guys," Carter called. "We're ready."

The room beyond the criosphinxes was a "greatest hits" collection from the Egyptian afterlife. A life-sized wooden Anubis stared down from his pedestal. Atop a replica of the scales of justice sat a golden baboon, which Khufu immediately started flirting with. There were masks of pharaohs, maps of the Underworld, and loads of canopic jars that had once been filled with mummy organs.

Carter passed all that by. He gathered us around a long papyrus scroll in a glass case on the back wall.

"This is what you're after?" JD frowned. "The Book of Overcoming Apophis? You do realize that even the best spells against Apophis aren't very effective."

Carter reached in his pocket and produced a bit of burned papyrus. "This is all we could salvage

from Toronto. It was another copy of the same scroll."

JD took the papyrus scrap. It was no bigger than a postcard and too charred to let us make out more than a few hieroglyphs.

"'Overcoming Apophis…'" he read. "But this is one of the most common magic scrolls. Hundreds of copies have survived from ancient times."

"No." I fought the urge to look over my shoulder, in case any giant serpents were listening in. "Apophis is after only one particular version, written by this chap."

I tapped the information plaque next to the display. "'Attributed to Prince Khaemwaset,'" I read, "'better known as Setne.'"

JD scowled. "That's an evil name…one of most villainous magicians who ever lived."

"So we've heard," I said, "and Apophis is destroying only *Setne's* version of the scroll. As far as we can tell, only six copies existed. Apophis has already burned five. This is the last one."

JD studied the burned papyrus scrap doubtfully. "If Apophis has truly risen from the Duat with all his power, why would he care about a few scrolls? No spell could possibly stop him. Why hasn't he already destroyed the world?"

We'd been asking ourselves the same question for months.

"Apophis is afraid of this scroll," I said, hoping I was right. "Something in it must hold the secret to defeating him. He wants to make sure all copies are destroyed before he invades the world."

"Sadie, we need to hurry," Carter said. "The attack could come any minute."

I stepped closer to the scroll. It was roughly two meters long and a half-meter tall, with dense lines of hieroglyphs and colorful illustrations. I'd seen loads of scrolls like this describing ways to defeat Chaos, with chants designed to keep the serpent Apophis from devouring the sun god Ra on his nightly journey through the Duat. Ancient Egyptians had been quite obsessed with this subject. Cheery bunch, those Egyptians.

I could read the hieroglyphs—one of my many amazing talents—but the scroll was a lot to take in. At first glance, nothing struck me as particularly helpful. There were the usual descriptions of the River of Night, down which Ra's sun boat traveled. Been there, thanks. There were tips on how to handle the various demons of the Duat. Met them. Killed them. Got the T-shirt.

"Sadie?" Carter asked. "Anything?"

"Don't know yet," I grumbled. "Give me a moment."

I found it annoying that my bookish brother was the combat magician, while *I* was expected to be the great reader of magic. I barely had the patience for magazines, much less musty scrolls.

You'd never understand it, the face in the wall had warned. *You need my help.*

"We'll have to take it with us," I decided. "I'm sure I can figure it out with a little more—"

The building shook. Khufu shrieked and leaped into the arms of the golden baboon. Felix's penguins waddled around frantically.

"That sounded like—" JD Grissom blanched. "An explosion outside. The party!"

"It's a diversion," Carter warned. "Apophis is trying to draw our defenses away from the scroll."

"They're attacking my friends," JD said in a strangled voice. "My wife."

"Go!" I said. I glared at my brother. "We can handle the scroll. JD's *wife* is in danger!"

JD clasped my hands. "Take the scroll. Good luck."

He ran from the room.

I turned back to the display. "Walt, can you open the case? We need to get this out of here as fast __"

Evil laughter filled the room. A dry, heavy voice, deep as a nuclear blast, echoed all around us: *"I don't think so, Sadie Kane."*

My skin felt as if it were turning to brittle papyrus. I remembered that voice. I remembered how it felt being so close to Chaos, as if my blood were turning to fire, and the strands of my DNA were unraveling.

"I think I'll destroy you with the guardians of Ma'at," Apophis said. *"Yes, that will be amusing."*

At the entrance to the room, the two obsidian criosphinxes turned. They blocked the exit, standing shoulder to shoulder. Flames curled from their nostrils.

In the voice of Apophis, they spoke in unison: "No one leaves this place alive. Good-bye, Sadie Kane."

SADIE

2. I Have a Word with Chaos

WOULD YOU BE SURPRISED TO LEARN that things went badly from there?

I didn't think so.

Our first casualties were Felix's penguins. The criosphinxes blew fire at the unfortunate birds, and they melted into puddles of water.

"No!" Felix cried.

The room rumbled, much stronger this time.

Khufu screamed and jumped on Carter's head, knocking him to the floor. Under different circumstances that would've been funny, but I realized Khufu had just saved my brother's life.

Where Carter had been standing, the floor dissolved, marble tiles crumbling as if broken apart by an invisible jackhammer. The area of disruption snaked across the room, destroying everything in its path, sucking artifacts into the ground and chewing them to bits. Yes…*snaked* was the right word. The destruction slithered exactly like a serpent, heading straight for the back wall and the Book of Overcoming Apophis.

"Scroll!" I shouted.

No one seemed to hear. Carter was still on the floor, trying to pry Khufu off his head. Felix knelt in shock at the puddles of his penguins, while Walt and Alyssa tried to pull him away from the fiery criosphinxes.

I slipped my wand from my belt and shouted the first word of power that came to mind: *"Drowah!"*

Golden hieroglyphs—the command for *Boundary*—blazed in the air. A wall of light flashed between the display case and the advancing line of destruction:

I'd often used this spell to separate quarreling initiates or to protect the snack cupboard from late-night nom-nom raids, but I'd never tried it for something so important.

As soon as the invisible jackhammer reached my shield, the spell began to fall apart. The disturbance spread up the wall of light, shaking it to pieces. I tried to concentrate, but a much more powerful force—Chaos itself—was working against me, invading my mind and scattering my magic.

In a panic, I realized I couldn't let go. I was locked in a battle I couldn't win. Apophis was

shredding my thoughts as easily as he'd shredded the floor.

Walt knocked the wand out of my hands.

Darkness washed over me. I slumped into Walt's arms. When my vision cleared, my hands were burned and steaming. I was too shocked to feel the pain. The Book of Overcoming Apophis was gone. Nothing remained except a pile of rubble and a massive hole in the wall, as if a tank had smashed through.

Despair threatened to close up my throat, but my friends gathered around me. Walt held me steady. Carter drew his sword. Khufu showed his fangs and barked at the criosphinxes. Alyssa wrapped her arms around Felix, who was sobbing into her sleeve. He had quickly lost his courage when his penguins were taken away.

"So that's it?" I shouted at the criosphinxes. "Burn up the scroll and run away as usual? Are you so afraid to show yourself in person?"

More laughter rolled through the room. The criosphinxes stood unmoving in the doorway, but figurines and jewelry rattled in the display cases. With a painful creaking sound, the golden baboon statue that Khufu had been chatting up suddenly turned its head.

"But I am everywhere." The serpent spoke through the statue's mouth. "I can destroy anything you value…and anyone you value."

Khufu wailed in outrage. He launched himself at the baboon and knocked it over. It melted into a steaming pool of gold.

A different statue came to life—a gilded wooden pharaoh with a hunting spear. Its eyes turned the color of blood. Its carved mouth twisted into a smile. "Your magic is weak, Sadie Kane. Human civilization has grown as old and rotten. I will swallow the sun god and plunge your world into darkness. The Sea of Chaos will consume you all."

As if the energy were too much for it to contain, the pharaoh statue burst. Its pedestal disintegrated, and another line of evil jackhammer magic snaked across the room, churning up the floor tiles. It headed for a display against the east wall—a small golden cabinet.

Save it, said a voice inside me—possibly my subconscious, or possibly the voice of Isis, my patron goddess. We'd shared thoughts so many times, it was hard to be sure.

I remembered what the face in the wall had told me…*Go for the golden box. That'll give you a clue about what you need.*

"The box!" I yelped. "Stop him!"

My friends stared at me. From somewhere outside, another explosion shook the building. Chunks of plaster rained from the ceiling.

"Are these children the best you could send against me?" Apophis spoke from an ivory *shabti* in the nearest case—a miniature sailor on a toy boat. "Walt Stone…you are the luckiest. Even if you survive tonight, your sickness will kill you before my great victory. You won't have to watch your world destroyed."

Walt staggered. Suddenly I was supporting him. My burned hands hurt so badly, I had to fight down a surge of nausea.

The line of destruction trundled across the floor, still heading for the golden cabinet. Alyssa thrust out her staff and barked a command.

For a moment, the floor stabilized, smoothing into a solid sheet of gray stone. Then new cracks appeared, and the force of Chaos blasted its way through.

"Brave Alyssa," the serpent said, "the earth you love will dissolve into Chaos. You will have no place to stand!"

Alyssa's staff burst into flames. She screamed and threw it aside.

"Stop it!" Felix yelled. He smashed the glass case with his staff and demolished the miniature sailor along with a dozen other *shabti*.

Apophis's voice simply moved to a jade amulet of Isis on a nearby manikin. "Ah, little Felix, I find you amusing. Perhaps I'll keep you as a pet, like those ridiculous birds you love. I wonder how long you'll last before your sanity crumbles."

Felix threw his wand and knocked over the manikin.

The crumbling trail of Chaos was now halfway to the golden cabinet.

"He's after that box!" I managed to say. "Save the box!"

Granted, it wasn't the most inspiring call to battle, but Carter seemed to understand. He jumped in front of the advancing Chaos, stabbing his sword into the floor. His blade cut through the marble tile like ice cream. A blue line of magic extended to either side—Carter's own version of a force field. The line of disruption slammed against the barrier and stalled.

"Poor Carter Kane." The serpent's voice was all around us now—jumping from artifact to artifact, each one bursting from the power of Chaos. *"Your leadership is doomed. Everything you tried to build will crumble. You will lose the ones you love the most."*

Carter's blue defensive line began to flicker. If I didn't help him quickly…

"Apophis!" I yelled. "Why wait to destroy me? Do it now, you overgrown rat snake!"

A hiss echoed through the room. Perhaps I should mention that one of my many talents is making people angry. Apparently it worked on snakes, too.

The floor settled. Carter released his shielding spell and almost collapsed. Khufu, bless his baboon wits, leaped to the golden cabinet, picked it up, and bounded off with it.

When Apophis spoke again, his voice hardened with anger. *"Very well, Sadie Kane. It's time to die."*

The two ram-headed sphinxes stirred, their mouths glowing with flames. Then they lunged straight at me.

Fortunately one of them slipped in a puddle of penguin water and skidded off to the left. The other would've ripped my throat out had it not been tackled by a timely camel.

Yes, an actual full-sized camel. If you find that confusing, just think how the criosphinx must have felt.

Where did the camel come from, you ask? I may have mentioned Walt's collection of amulets. Two of them summoned disgusting camels. I'd met them before, so I was less than excited when a ton of dromedary flesh flew across my line of sight, plowed into the sphinx, and collapsed on top of it. The sphinx growled in outrage as it tried to free itself. The camel grunted and farted.

"Hindenburg," I said. Only one camel could possibly fart that badly. "Walt, why in the world —?"

"Sorry!" he yelled. "Wrong amulet!"

The technique worked, at any rate. The camel wasn't much of a fighter, but it was quite heavy and clumsy. The criosphinx snarled and clawed at the floor, trying unsuccessfully to push the camel off; but Hindenburg just splayed his legs, made alarmed honking sounds, and let loose gas.

I moved to Walt's side and tried to get my bearings.

The room was quite literally in chaos. Tendrils of red lightning arced between exhibits. The floor was crumbling. The walls cracked. Artifacts were coming to life and attacking my friends.

Carter fended off the other criosphinx, stabbing it with his *khopesh*, but the monster parried his strikes with its horns and breathed fire.

Felix was surrounded by a tornado of canopic jars that pummeled him from every direction as he swatted them with his staff. An army of tiny *shabti* had surrounded Alyssa, who was chanting desperately, using her earth magic to keep the room in one piece. The statue of Anubis chased Khufu around the room, smashing things with its fists as our brave baboon cradled the golden cabinet.

All around us, the power of Chaos grew. I felt it in my ears like a coming storm. The presence of Apophis was shaking apart the entire museum.

How could I help all my friends at once, protect that gold cabinet, *and* keep the museum from collapsing on top of us?

"Sadie," Walt prompted. "What's the plan?"

The first criosphinx finally pushed Hindenburg off its back. It turned and blew fire at the camel, which let loose one final fart and shrank back into a harmless gold amulet. Then the criosphinx turned toward me. It did not look pleased.

"Walt," I said, "guard me."

"Sure." He eyed the criosphinx uncertainly. "While you do what?"

Good question, I thought.

"We have to protect that cabinet," I said. "It's some sort of clue. We have to restore Ma'at, or this building will implode and we'll all die."

"How do we restore Ma'at?"

Instead of answering, I concentrated. I lowered my vision into the Duat.

It's hard to describe what it's like to experience the world on many levels at once—it's a bit like looking through 3D glasses and seeing hazy colorful auras around things, except the auras don't always match the objects, and the images are constantly shifting. Magicians have to be careful when they look into the Duat. Best-case scenario, you'll get mildly nauseous. Worst-case scenario, your brain will explode.

In the Duat, the room was filled with the writhing coils of a giant red snake—the magic of Apophis slowly expanding and encircling my friends. I almost lost my concentration along with my dinner.

Isis, I called. *A little help?*

The goddess's strength surged through me. I stretched out my senses and saw my brother battling the criosphinx. Standing in Carter's place was the warrior god Horus, his sword blazing with light.

Swirling around Felix, the canopic jars were the hearts of evil spirits—shadowy figures that clawed and snapped at our young friend, though Felix had a surprisingly powerful aura in the Duat.

His vivid purple glow seemed to keep the spirits at bay.

Alyssa was surrounded by a dust storm in the shape of a giant man. As she chanted, Geb the earth god lifted his arms and held up the ceiling. The *shabti* army surrounding her blazed like a wildfire.

Khufu looked no different in the Duat, but as he leaped around the room evading the Anubis statue, the golden cabinet he was carrying flapped open. Inside was pure darkness—as if it were full of octopus ink.

I wasn't sure what that meant, but then I looked at Walt and gasped.

In the Duat, he was shrouded in flickering gray linen—mummy cloth. His flesh was transparent. His bones were luminous, as if he were a living X-ray.

His curse, I thought. *He's marked for death.*

Even worse: the criosphinx facing him was the center of the Chaos storm. Tendrils of red lightning arced from its body. Its ram face changed into the head of Apophis, with yellow serpentine eyes and dripping fangs.

It lunged at Walt, but before it could strike, Walt threw an amulet. Golden chains exploded in the monster's face, wrapping around its snout. The criosphinx stumbled and thrashed like a dog in a muzzle.

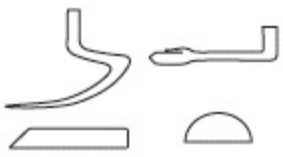
"Sadie, it's all right." Walt's voice sounded deeper and more confident, as if he were older in the Duat. "Speak your spell. Hurry."

The criosphinx flexed its jaws. The gold chains groaned. The other criosphinx had backed Carter against a wall. Felix was on his knees, his purple aura failing in a swirl of dark spirits. Alyssa was losing her battle against the crumbling room as chunks of the ceiling fell around her. The Anubis statue grabbed Khufu's tail and held him upside down while the baboon howled and wrapped his arms around the gold cabinet.

Now or never: I had to restore order.

I channeled the power of Isis, drawing so deeply on my own magic reserves, I could feel my soul start to burn. I forced myself to focus, and I spoke the most powerful of all divine words: "Ma'at."

The hieroglyph burned in front of me—small and bright like a miniature sun:



"Good!" Walt said. "Keep at it!" Somehow he'd managed to pull in the chains and grab the sphinx's snout. While the creature bore down on him with all its force, Walt's strange gray aura was spreading across the monster's body like an infection. The criosphinx hissed and writhed. I caught a whiff of decay like the air from a tomb—so strong that I almost lost my concentration.

"Sadie," Walt urged, "maintain the spell!"

I focused on the hieroglyph. I channeled all my energy into that symbol for order and creation. The word shone brighter. The coils of the serpent burned away like fog in sunlight. The two criosphinxes crumbled to dust. The canopic jars fell and shattered. The Anubis statue dropped Khufu

on his head. The army of *shabti* froze around Alyssa, and her earth magic spread through the room, sealing cracks and shoring up walls.

I felt Apophis retreating deeper into the Duat, hissing in anger.

Then I promptly collapsed.

"I told you she could do it," said a kindly voice.

My mother's voice…but of course that was impossible. She was dead, which meant I spoke with her only occasionally, and only in the Underworld.

My vision returned, hazy and dim. Two women hovered over me. One was my mum—her blond hair clipped back, her deep blue eyes sparkling with pride. She was transparent, as ghosts tend to be; but her voice was warm and very much alive. "It isn't the end yet, Sadie. You must carry on."

Next to her stood Isis in her white silky gown, her wings of rainbow light flickering behind her. Her hair was glossy black, woven with strands of diamonds. Her face was as beautiful as my mum's, but more queenly, less warm.

Don't misunderstand. I knew from sharing Isis's thoughts that she cared for me in her own way, but gods are not human. They have trouble thinking of us as more than useful tools or cute pets. To gods, a human life span doesn't seem much longer than that of the average gerbil.

"I would not have believed it," Isis said. "The last magician to summon Ma'at was Hatshepsut herself, and even she could only do it while wearing a fake beard."

I had no idea what that meant. I decided I didn't want to know.

I tried to move but couldn't. I felt as if I were floating at the bottom of a bathtub, suspended in warm water, the two women's faces rippling at me from just above the surface.

"Sadie, listen carefully," my mother said. "Don't blame yourself for the deaths. When you make your plan, your father will object. You must convince him. Tell him it's the only way to save the souls of the dead. Tell him…" Her expression turned grim. "Tell him it's the only way he'll see *me* again. You *must* succeed, my sweet."

I wanted to ask what she meant, but I couldn't seem to speak.

Isis touched my forehead. Her fingers were as cold as snow. "We must not tax her any further. Farewell for now, Sadie. The time rapidly approaches when we must join together again. You are strong. Even stronger than your mother. Together we will rule the world."

"You mean, *Together we will defeat Apophis*," my mother corrected.

"Of course," Isis said. "That's what I meant."

Their faces blurred together. They spoke in a single voice: "I love you."

A blizzard swept across my eyes. My surroundings changed, and I was standing in a dark graveyard with Anubis. Not the musty old jackal-headed god as he appeared in Egyptian tomb art, but Anubis as I usually saw him—a teenaged boy with warm brown eyes, tousled black hair, and a face that was ridiculously, annoyingly gorgeous. I mean, *please*—being a god, he had an unfair advantage. He could look like anything he wanted. Why did he always have to appear in *this* form that twisted my insides to pretzels?

"Wonderful," I managed to say. "If you're here, I must be dead."

Anubis smiled. "Not dead, though you came close. That was a risky move."

A burning sensation started in my face and worked its way down my neck. I wasn't sure if it was embarrassment, anger, or delight at seeing him.

"Where have you been?" I demanded. "Six months, not a word."

His smile melted. "They wouldn't let me see you."

"Who wouldn't let you?"

"There are rules," he said. "Even now they're watching; but you're close enough to death that I can manage a few moments. I need to tell you: you have the right idea. Look at what *isn't* there. It's the only way you might survive."

"Right," I grumbled. "Thanks for not speaking in riddles."

The warm sensation reached my heart. It began to beat, and suddenly I realized I'd been *without* a heartbeat since I'd passed out. That probably wasn't good.

"Sadie, there's something else." Anubis's voice became watery. His image began to fade. "I need to tell you—"

"Tell me in person," I said. "None of this 'death vision' nonsense."

"I can't. They won't let me."

"You still sound like a little boy. You're a god, aren't you? You can bloody well do what you like."

Anger smoldered in his eyes. Then, to my surprise, he laughed. "I'd forgotten how irritating you are. I'll try to visit…*briefly*. We have something to discuss." He reached out and brushed the side of my face. "You're waking now. Good-bye, Sadie."

"Don't leave." I grasped his hand and held it against my cheek.

The warmth spread throughout my body. Anubis faded away.

My eyes flew open. "Don't leave!"

My burned hands were bandaged, and I was gripping a hairy baboon paw. Khufu looked down at me, rather confused. *"Agh?"*

Oh, fab. I was flirting with a monkey.

I sat up groggily. Carter and our friends gathered around me. The room hadn't collapsed, but the entire King Tut exhibit was in ruins. I had a feeling we would not be invited to join the Friends of the Dallas Museum anytime soon.

"Wh-what happened?" I stammered. "How long—?"

"You were dead for two minutes," Carter said, his voice shaky. "I mean, *no heartbeat*, Sadie. I thought…I was afraid…"

He choked up. Poor boy. He really would have been lost without me.

[Ouch, Carter! Don't pinch.]

"You summoned Ma'at," Alyssa said in amazement. "That's like…impossible."

I suppose it was rather impressive. Using divine words to create an object like an animal or a chair or a sword—that's hard enough. Summoning an element like fire or water is even trickier. But summoning a concept, like Order—that's just not done. At the moment, however, I was in too much pain to appreciate my own amazingness. I felt as if I'd just summoned an anvil and dropped it on my

head.

"Lucky try," I said. "What about the golden cabinet?"

"Agh!" Khufu gestured proudly to the gilded box, which sat nearby, safe and sound.

"Good baboon," I said. "Extra Cheerios for you tonight."

Walt frowned. "But the Book of Overcoming Apophis was destroyed. How will a cabinet help us? You said it was some kind of clue…?"

I found it hard to look at Walt without feeling guilty. My heart had been torn between him and Anubis for months now, and it just wasn't fair of Anubis to pop into my dreams, looking all hot and immortal, when poor Walt was risking his life to protect me and getting weaker by the day. I remembered how he had looked in the Duat, in his ghostly gray mummy linen.…

No. I couldn't think about that. I forced myself to concentrate on the golden cabinet.

Look at what isn't there, Anubis had said. Bloody gods and their bloody riddles.

The face in the wall—Uncle Vinnie—had told me the box would give us a hint about how to defeat Apophis, *if* I was smart enough to understand it.

"I'm not sure what it means yet," I admitted. "If the Texans let us take it back to Brooklyn House…"

A horrible realization settled over me. There were no more sounds of explosions outside. Just eerie silence.

"The Texans!" I yelped. "What's happened to them?"

Felix and Alyssa bolted for the exit. Carter and Walt helped me to my feet, and we ran after them.

The guards had all disappeared from their stations. We reached the museum foyer, and I saw columns of white smoke outside the glass walls, rising from the sculpture garden.

"No," I murmured. "No, no."

We tore across the street. The well-kept lawn was now a crater as big as an Olympic pool. The bottom was littered with melted metal sculptures and chunks of stone. Tunnels that had once led into the Fifty-first Nome's headquarters had collapsed like a giant anthill some bully had stepped on. Around the rim of the crater were bits of smoking evening wear, smashed plates of tacos, broken champagne glasses, and the shattered staffs of magicians.

Don't blame yourself for the deaths, my mother had said.

I moved in a daze to the remains of the patio. Half the concrete slab had cracked and slid into the crater. A charred fiddle lay in the mud next to a gleaming bit of silver.

Carter stood next to me. "We—we should search," he said. "There might be survivors."

I swallowed back a sob. I wasn't sure how, but I sensed the truth with absolute certainty. "There aren't any."

The Texas magicians had welcomed us and supported us. JD Grissom had shaken my hand and wished me luck before running off to save his wife. But we'd seen the work of Apophis in other nomes. Carter had warned JD: *The serpent's minions don't leave any survivors.*

I knelt down and picked up the gleaming piece of silver—a half-melted Lone Star belt buckle.

"They're dead," I said. "All of them."

CARTER

3. We Win a Box Full of Nothing

ON THAT HAPPY NOTE, Sadie hands me the microphone. [Thanks a lot, sis.]

I wish I could tell you that Sadie was wrong about the Fifty-first Nome. I'd love to say we found all the Texas magicians safe and sound. We didn't. We found nothing except the remnants of a battle: burned ivory wands, a few shattered *shabti*, scraps of smoldering linen and papyrus. Just like in the attacks on Toronto, Chicago, and Mexico City, the magicians had simply vanished. They'd been vaporized, devoured, or destroyed in some equally horrible way.

At the edge of the crater, one hieroglyph burned in the grass: *Isfet*, the symbol for Chaos. I had a feeling Apophis had left it there as a calling card.

We were all in shock, but we didn't have time to mourn our comrades. The mortal authorities would be arriving soon to check out the scene. We had to repair the damage as best we could and remove all traces of magic.

There wasn't much we could do about the crater. The locals would just have to assume there'd been a gas explosion. (We tended to cause a lot of those.)

We tried to fix the museum and restore the King Tut collection, but it wasn't as easy as cleaning up the gift shop. Magic can only go so far. So if you go to a King Tut exhibit someday and notice cracks or burn marks on the artifacts, or maybe a statue with its head glued on backward—well, sorry. That was probably our fault.

As police blocked the streets and cordoned off the blast zone, our team gathered on the museum roof. In better times we might have used an artifact to open a portal to take us back home; but over the last few months, as Apophis had gotten stronger, portals had become too risky to use.

Instead I whistled for our ride. Freak the griffin glided over from the top of the nearby Fairmont Hotel.

It's not easy finding a place to stash a griffin, especially when he's pulling a boat. You can't just parallel-park something like that and put a few coins in the meter. Besides, Freak tends to get nervous around strangers and swallow them, so I'd settled him on top of the Fairmont with a crate of frozen turkeys to keep him occupied. They have to be frozen. Otherwise he eats them too fast and gets hiccups.

(Sadie is telling me to hurry up with the story. She says you don't care about the feeding habits of griffins. Well, excuse me.)

Anyway, Freak came in for a landing on the museum roof. He was a beautiful monster, if you like psychotic falcon-headed lions. His fur was the color of rust, and as he flew, his giant hummingbird wings sounded like a cross between chain saws and kazoos.

"FREEAAAK!" Freak cawed.

"Yeah, buddy," I agreed. "Let's get out of here."

The boat trailing behind him was an Ancient Egyptian model—shaped like a big canoe made from bundles of papyrus reeds, enchanted by Walt so that it stayed airborne no matter how much weight it carried.

The first time we'd flown Air Freak, we'd strung the boat underneath Freak's belly, which hadn't been very stable. And you couldn't simply ride on his back, because those high-powered wings would chop you to shreds. So the sleigh-boat was our new solution. It worked great, except when Felix yelled down at the mortals, "Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas!"

Of course, most mortals can't see magic clearly, so I'm not sure what they *thought* they saw as we passed overhead. No doubt it caused many of them to adjust their medication.

We soared into the night sky—the six of us and a small cabinet. I still didn't understand Sadie's interest in the golden box, but I trusted her enough to believe it was important.

I glanced down at the wreckage of the sculpture garden. The smoking crater looked like a ragged mouth, screaming. Fire trucks and police cars had surrounded it with a perimeter of red and white lights. I wondered how many magicians had died in that explosion.

Freak picked up speed. My eyes stung, but it wasn't from the wind. I turned so my friends couldn't see.

Your leadership is doomed.

Apophis would say anything to throw us into confusion and make us doubt our cause. Still, his words hit me hard.

I didn't like being a leader. I always had to appear confident for the sake of the others, even when I wasn't.

I missed having my dad to rely on. I missed Uncle Amos, who'd gone off to Cairo to run the House of Life. As for Sadie, my bossy sister, she always supported me, but she'd made it clear she didn't want to be an authority figure. Officially, *I* was in charge of Brooklyn House. Officially, I called the shots. In my mind, that meant if we made mistakes, like getting an entire nome wiped off the face of the earth, then the fault was mine.

Okay, Sadie would never actually blame me for something like that, but that's how I felt.

Everything you tried to build will crumble….

It seemed incredible that not even a year had passed since Sadie and I first arrived at Brooklyn House, completely clueless about our heritage and our powers. Now we were running the place—training an army of young magicians to fight Apophis using the path of the gods, a kind of magic that hadn't been practiced in thousands of years. We'd made so much progress—but judging from how our fight against Apophis had gone tonight, our efforts hadn't been enough.

You will lose the ones you love the most….

I'd already lost so many people. My mom had died when I was seven. My dad had sacrificed himself to become the host of Osiris last year. Over the summer, many of our allies had fallen to Apophis, or been ambushed and "disappeared" thanks to the rebel magicians who didn't accept my Uncle Amos as the new Chief Lector.

Who else could I lose…Sadie?

No, I'm not being sarcastic. Even though we'd grown up separately for most of our lives—me traveling around with Dad, Sadie living in London with Gran and Gramps—she was still my sister. We'd grown close over the last year. As annoying as she was, I needed her.

Wow, that's depressing.

(And there's the punch in the arm I was expecting. Ow.)

Or maybe Apophis meant someone else, like Zia Rashid…

Our boat rose above the glittering suburbs of Dallas. With a defiant squawk, Freak pulled us into the Duat. Fog swallowed the boat. The temperature dropped to freezing. I felt a familiar tingle in my stomach, as if we were plunging from the top of a roller coaster. Ghostly voices whispered in the mist.

Just when I started to think we were lost, my dizziness passed. The fog cleared. We were back on the East Coast, sailing over New York Harbor toward the nighttime lights of the Brooklyn waterfront and home.

The headquarters of the Twenty-first Nome perched on the shoreline near the Williamsburg Bridge. Regular mortals wouldn't see anything but a huge dilapidated warehouse in the middle of an industrial yard, but to magicians, Brooklyn House was as obvious as a lighthouse—a five-story mansion of limestone blocks and steel-framed glass rising from the top of the warehouse, glowing with yellow and green lights.

Freak landed on the roof, where the cat goddess Bast was waiting for us.

"My kittens are alive!" She took my arms and looked me over for wounds, then did the same to Sadie. She tutted disapprovingly as she examined Sadie's bandaged hands.

Bast's luminous feline eyes were a little unsettling. Her long black hair was tied back in a braid, and her acrobatic bodysuit changed patterns as she moved—by turns tiger stripes, leopard spots, or calico. As much as I loved and trusted her, she made me a little nervous when she did her "mother cat" inspections. She kept knives up her sleeves—deadly iron blades that could slip into her hands with the flick of her wrists—and I was always afraid she might make a mistake, pat me on the cheek, and end up decapitating me. At least she didn't try to pick us up by the scruffs of our necks or give us a bath.

"What happened?" she asked. "Everyone is safe?"

Sadie took a shaky breath. "Well…"

We told her about the destruction of the Texas nome.

Bast growled deep in her throat. Her hair poofed out, but the braid held it down so her scalp looked like a heated pan of Jiffy Pop popcorn. "I should've been there," she said. "I could have helped!"

"You couldn't," I said. "The museum was too well protected."

Gods are almost never able to enter magicians' territory in their physical forms. Magicians have spent millennia developing enchanted wards to keep them out. We'd had enough trouble reworking the wards on Brooklyn House to give Bast access without opening ourselves up to attacks by less friendly gods.

Taking Bast to the Dallas Museum would've been like trying to get a bazooka through airport security—if not totally impossible, then at least pretty darn slow and difficult. Besides, Bast was our

last line of defense for Brooklyn House. We needed her to protect our home base and our initiates. Twice before, our enemies had almost destroyed the mansion. We didn't want there to be a third time.

Bast's bodysuit turned pure black, as it tended to do when she was moody. "Still, I'd never forgive myself if you…" She glanced at our tired, frightened crew. "Well, at least you're back safe. What's the next step?"

Walt stumbled. Alyssa and Felix caught him.

"I'm fine," he insisted, though he clearly wasn't. "Carter, I can get everyone together if you want. A meeting on the terrace?"

He looked like he was about to pass out. Walt would never admit it, but our main healer, Jaz, had told me that his level of pain was almost unbearable all the time now. He was only able to stay on his feet because she kept tattooing pain-relief hieroglyphs on his chest and giving him potions. In spite of that, I'd asked him to come to Dallas with us—another decision that weighed on my heart.

The rest of our crew needed sleep too. Felix's eyes were puffy from crying. Alyssa looked like she was going into shock.

If we met now, I wouldn't know what to say. I had no plan. I couldn't stand in front of the whole nome without breaking down. Not after having caused so many deaths in Dallas.

I glanced at Sadie. We came to a silent agreement.

"We'll meet tomorrow," I told the others. "You guys get some sleep. What happened with the Texans…" My voice caught. "Look, I know how you feel. I feel the same way. But it wasn't your fault."

I'm not sure they bought it. Felix wiped a tear from his cheek. Alyssa put her arm around him and led him toward the stairwell. Walt gave Sadie a glance I couldn't interpret—maybe wistfulness or regret—then followed Alyssa downstairs.

"Agh?" Khufu patted the golden cabinet.

"Yeah," I said. "Could you take it to the library?"

That was the most secure room in the mansion. I didn't want to take any chances after all we'd sacrificed to save the box. Khufu waddled away with it.

Freak was so tired, he didn't even make it to his covered roost. He just curled up where he was and started snoring, still attached to the boat. Traveling through the Duat takes a lot out of him.

I undid his harness and scratched his feathery head. "Thanks, buddy. Dream of big fat turkeys."

He cooed in his sleep.

I turned to Sadie and Bast. "We need to talk."

It was almost midnight, but the Great Room was still buzzing with activity. Julian, Paul, and a few of the other guys were crashed on the couches, watching the sports channel. The ankle-biters (our three youngest trainees) were coloring pictures on the floor. Chip bags and soda cans littered the coffee table. Shoes were tossed randomly across the snakeskin rug. In the middle of the room, the two-story-tall statue of Thoth, the ibis-headed god of knowledge, loomed over our initiates with his scroll and quill. Somebody had put one of Amos's old porkpie hats on the statue's head, so he looked like a bookie taking bets on the football game. One of the ankle-biters had colored the god's obsidian toes pink and purple with crayons. We're big on respect here at Brooklyn House.

As Sadie and I came down the stairs, the guys on the couch got to their feet.

"How did it go?" Julian asked. "Walt just came through, but he wouldn't say—"

"Our team is safe," I said. "The Fifty-first Nome…not so lucky."

Julian winced. He knew better than to ask for details in front of the little kids. "Did you find anything helpful?"

"We're not sure yet," I admitted.

I wanted to leave it at that, but our youngest ankle-biter, Shelby, toddled over to show me her crayon masterpiece. "I kill a snake," she announced. "Kill, kill, kill. Bad snake!"

She'd drawn a serpent with a bunch of knives sticking out of its back and X's in its eyes. If Shelby had made that picture at school, it probably would've earned her a trip to the guidance counselor; but here even the littlest ones understood something serious was happening.

She gave me a toothy grin, shaking her crayon like a spear. I stepped back. Shelby might've been a kindergartner, but she was already an excellent magician. Her crayons sometimes morphed into weapons, and the things she drew tended to peel off the page—like the red, white, and blue unicorn she had summoned for the Fourth of July.

"Awesome picture, Shelby." I felt like my heart was being wrapped tight in mummy linen. Like all the littlest kids, Shelby was here with her parents' consent. The parents understood that the fate of the world was at stake. They knew Brooklyn House was the best and safest place for Shelby to master her powers. Still, what kind of childhood was this for her, channeling magic that would destroy most adults, learning about monsters that would give anybody nightmares?

Julian ruffled Shelby's hair. "Come on, sweetie. Draw me another picture, okay?"

Shelby said, "Kill?"

Julian steered her away. Sadie, Bast, and I headed to the library.

The heavy oaken doors opened to a staircase that descended into a huge cylindrical room like a well. Painted on the domed ceiling was Nut, the sky goddess, with silver constellations glittering on her dark blue body. The floor was a mosaic of her husband, Geb, the earth god, his body covered with rivers, hills, and deserts.

Even though it was late, our self-appointed librarian, Cleo, still had her four *shabti* statues at work. The clay men rushed around, dusting shelves, rearranging scrolls, and sorting books in the honeycombed compartments along the walls. Cleo herself sat at the worktable, jotting notes on a papyrus scroll while she talked to Khufu, who squatted on the table in front of her, patting our new antique cabinet and grunting in Baboon, like: *Hey, Cleo, wanna buy a gold box?*

Cleo wasn't much in the bravery department, but she had an incredible memory. She could speak six languages, including English, her native Portuguese (she was Brazilian), Ancient Egyptian, and a few words of Baboon. She'd taken it upon herself to create a master index to all our scrolls, and had been gathering more scrolls from all over the world to help us find information on Apophis. It was Cleo who'd found the connection between the serpent's recent attacks and the scrolls written by the legendary magician Setne.

She was a great help, though sometimes she got exasperated when she had to make room in *her* library for our school texts, Internet stations, large artifacts, and Bast's back issues of *Cat Fancy* magazine.

When Cleo saw us coming down the stairs, she jumped to her feet. "You're alive!"

"Don't sound so surprised," Sadie muttered.

Cleo chewed her lip. "Sorry, I just…I'm glad. Khufu came in alone, so I was worried. He was trying to tell me something about this gold box, but it's empty. Did you find the Book of Overcoming Apophis?"

"The scroll burned," I said. "We couldn't save it."

Cleo looked like she might scream. "But that was the last copy! How could Apophis destroy something so valuable?"

I wanted to remind Cleo that Apophis was out to destroy the entire world, but I knew she didn't like to think about that. It made her sick from fear.

Getting outraged about the scroll was more manageable for her. The idea that anybody could destroy a book of any kind made Cleo want to punch Apophis in the face.

One of the *shabti* jumped onto the table. He tried to stick a scanner label on the golden cabinet, but Cleo shooed the clay man away.

"All of you, back to your places!" She clapped her hands, and the four *shabti* returned to their pedestals. They reverted to solid clay, though one was still wearing rubber gloves and holding a feather duster, which looked a little odd.

Cleo leaned in and studied the gold box. "There's nothing inside. Why did you bring it?"

"That's what Sadie, Bast, and I need to discuss," I said. "If you don't mind, Cleo."

"I don't mind." Cleo kept examining the cabinet. Then she realized we were all staring at her. "Oh…you mean privately. Of course."

She looked a little upset about getting kicked out, but she took Khufu's hand. "Come on, *babuinozinho*. We'll get you a snack."

"Agh!" Khufu said happily. He adored Cleo, possibly because of her name. For reasons none of us quite understood, Khufu loved things that ended in -O, like avocados, Oreos, and armadillos.

Once Cleo and Khufu were gone, Sadie, Bast, and I gathered around our new acquisition.

The cabinet was shaped like a miniature school locker. The exterior was gold, but it must've been a thin layer of foil covering wood, because the whole thing wasn't very heavy. The sides and top were engraved with hieroglyphs and pictures of the pharaoh and his wife. The front was fitted with latched double doors, which opened to reveal…well, not much of anything. There was a tiny pedestal marked by gold footprints, as if an Ancient Egyptian Barbie doll had once stood there.

Sadie studied the hieroglyphs along the sides of the box. "It's all about Tut and his queen, wishing them a happy afterlife, blah, blah. There's a picture of him hunting ducks. Honestly? That was his idea of paradise?"

"I like ducks," Bast said.

I moved the little doors back and forth on their hinges. "Somehow I don't think the ducks are important. Whatever was inside here, it's gone now. Maybe grave robbers took it, or—"

Bast chuckled. "Grave robbers took it. Sure."

I frowned at her. "What's so funny?"

She grinned at me, then Sadie, before apparently realizing we didn't get the joke. "Oh…I see.

You actually don't know what this is. I suppose that makes sense. Not many have survived."

"Not many what?" I asked.

"Shadow boxes."

Sadie wrinkled her nose. "Isn't that a sort of school project? Did one for English once. Deadly boring."

"I wouldn't know about school projects," Bast said haughtily. "That sounds suspiciously like *work*. But this is an *actual* shadow box—a box to hold a shadow."

Bast didn't sound like she was kidding, but it's hard to tell with cats.

"It's in there right now," she insisted. "Can't you see it? A little shadowy bit of Tut. Hello, shadow Tut!" She wriggled her fingers at the empty box. "That's why I laughed when you said grave robbers might have stolen it. Ha! That would be a trick."

I tried to wrap my mind around this idea. "But…I've heard Dad lecture on, like, every possible Egyptian artifact. I never once heard him mention a shadow box."

"As I told you," Bast said, "not many have survived. Usually the shadow box was buried far away from the rest of the soul. Tut was quite silly to have it placed in his tomb. Perhaps one of the priests put it there against his orders, out of spite."

I was totally lost now. To my surprise, Sadie was nodding enthusiastically.

"That must've been what Anubis meant," she said. "*Pay attention to what's not there.* When I looked into the Duat, I saw darkness inside the box. And Uncle Vinnie said it was a clue to defeating Apophis."

I made a "Time out" T with my hands. "Back up. Sadie, where did you see Anubis? And since when do we have an uncle named Vinnie?"

She looked a little embarrassed, but she described her encounter with the face in the wall, then the visions she'd had of our mom and Isis and her godly almost-boyfriend Anubis. I knew my sister's attention wandered a lot, but even *I* was impressed by how many mystical side trips she'd managed, just walking through a museum.

"The face in the wall could've been a trick," I said.

"Possibly…but I don't think so. The face said we would need his help, and we had only two days until something happened to him. He told me this box would show us what we needed. Anubis hinted I was on the right track, saving this cabinet. And Mum…" Sadie faltered. "Mum said this was the only way we'd ever see her again. Something is happening to the spirits of the dead."

Suddenly I felt like I was back in the Duat, wrapped in freezing fog. I stared at the box, but I still didn't see anything. "How do shadows tie in to Apophis and spirits of the dead?"

I looked at Bast. She dug her fingernails into the table, using it like a scratching post, the way she does when she's tense. We go through a lot of tables.

"Bast?" Sadie asked gently.

"Apophis and shadows," Bast mused. "I'd never considered…" She shook her head. "These are really questions you should ask Thoth. He's much more knowledgeable than I."

A memory surfaced. My dad had given a lecture at a university somewhere…Munich, maybe? The students had asked him about the Egyptian concept of the soul, which had multiple parts, and my dad mentioned something about shadows.

Like one hand with five fingers, he'd said. *One soul with five parts.*

I held up my own fingers, trying to remember. "Five parts of the soul…what are they?"

Bast stayed silent. She looked pretty uncomfortable.

"Carter?" Sadie asked. "What does that have to do—?"

"Just humor me," I said. "The first part is the *ba*, right? Our personality."

"Chicken form," Sadie said.

Trust Sadie to nickname part of your soul after poultry, but I knew what she meant. The *ba* could leave the body when we dreamed, or it could come back to the earth as a ghost after we died. When it did, it appeared as a large glowing bird with a human head.

"Yeah," I said. "Chicken form. Then there's the *ka*, the life force that leaves the body when it dies. Then there's the *ib*, the heart—"

"The record of good and bad deeds," Sadie agreed. "That's the bit they weigh on the scales of justice in the afterlife."

"And fourth…" I hesitated.

"The *ren*," Sadie supplied. "Your secret name."

I was too embarrassed to look at her. Last spring she'd saved my life by speaking my secret name, which had basically given her access to my most private thoughts and darkest emotions. Since then she'd been pretty cool about it, but still…that's not the kind of leverage you want to give your little sister.

The *ren* was also the part of the soul that our friend Bes had given up for us in our gambling match six months ago with the moon god Khonsu. Now Bes was a hollow shell of a god, sitting in a wheelchair in the Underworld's divine nursing home.

"Right," I said. "But the fifth part…" I looked at Bast. "It's the shadow, isn't it?"

Sadie frowned. "The shadow? How can a shadow be part of your soul? It's just a silhouette, isn't it? A trick of the light."

Bast held her hand over the table. Her fingers cast a vague shadow over the wood. "You can never be free of your shadow—your *sheut*. All living beings have them."

"So do rocks, pencils, and shoes," Sadie said. "Does that mean *they* have souls?"

"You know better," Bast chided. "Living beings are different from rocks…well, *most* are, anyway. The *sheut* is not just a physical shadow. It's a magical projection—the silhouette of the soul."

"So this box…" I said. "When you say it holds King Tut's shadow—"

"I mean it holds one fifth of his soul," Bast confirmed. "It houses the pharaoh's *sheut* so it will not be lost in the afterlife."

My brain felt like it was about to explode. I knew this stuff about shadows must be important, but I didn't see how. It was like I'd been handed a puzzle piece, but it was for the wrong puzzle.

We'd failed to save the *right* piece—an irreplaceable scroll that might've helped us beat Apophis—and we'd failed to save an entire nome full of friendly magicians. All we had to show from our trip was an empty cabinet decorated with pictures of ducks. I wanted to knock King Tut's shadow box across the room.

"Lost shadows," I muttered. "This sounds like that *Peter Pan* story."

Bast's eyes glowed like paper lanterns. "What do you think *inspired* the story of Peter Pan's lost shadow? There have been folktales about shadows for centuries, Carter—all handed down since the days of Egypt."

"But how does that *help* us?" I demanded. "The Book of Overcoming Apophis would've helped us. Now it's gone!"

Okay, I sounded angry. I *was* angry.

Remembering my dad's lectures made me want to be a kid again, traveling the world with him. We'd been through some weird stuff together, but I'd always felt safe and protected. He'd always known what to do. Now all I had left from those days was my suitcase, gathering dust in my closet upstairs.

It wasn't fair. But I knew what my dad would say about that: *Fair means everyone gets what they need. And the only way to get what you need is to make that happen yourself.*

Great, Dad. I'm facing an impossible enemy, and what I *need* in order to defeat him just got destroyed.

Sadie must've read my expression. "Carter, we'll figure it out," she promised. "Bast, you were about to say something earlier about Apophis and shadows."

"No, I wasn't," Bast murmured.

"Why are you so nervous about this?" I asked. "Do gods *have* shadows? Does Apophis? If so, how do they work?"

Bast gouged some hieroglyphs in the table with her fingernails. I was pretty sure the message read: *DANGER.*

"Honestly, children…this is a question for Thoth. Yes, gods have shadows. Of course we do. But—but it's not something we're supposed to talk about."

I'd rarely seen Bast look so agitated. I wasn't sure why. This was a goddess who'd fought Apophis face-to-face, claw to fang, in a magical prison for thousands of years. Why was she scared of shadows?

"Bast," I said, "if we can't figure out a better solution, we'll have to go with Plan B."

The goddess winced. Sadie stared dejectedly at the table. Plan B was something only Sadie, Bast, Walt, and I had discussed. Our other initiates didn't know about it. We hadn't even told our Uncle Amos. It was *that* scary.

"I—I would hate that," Bast said. "But, Carter, I really don't know the answers. And if you start asking about shadows, you'll be delving into very dangerous—"

There was a knock on the library doors. Cleo and Khufu appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Sorry to disturb," Cleo said. "Carter, Khufu just came down from your room. He seems anxious to talk with you."

"Agh!" Khufu insisted.

Bast translated from baboon-speak. "He says there's a call for you on the scrying bowl, Carter. A *private* call."

As if I weren't stressed enough already. Only one person would be sending me a scrying vision, and if she was contacting me so late at night, it had to be bad news.

“Meeting adjourned,” I told the others. “See you in the morning.”

CARTER

4. I Consult the Pigeon of War

I WAS IN LOVE WITH A BIRDBATH.

Most guys checked their phone for texts, or obsessed over what girls were saying about them online. Me, I couldn't stay away from the scrying bowl.

It was just a bronze saucer on a stone pedestal, sitting on the balcony outside my bedroom. But whenever I was in my room, I found myself stealing glances at it, resisting the urge to rush outside and check for a glimpse of Zia.

The weird thing was—I couldn't even call her my girlfriend. What do you call somebody when you fall in love with her replica *shabti*, then rescue the real person only to find she doesn't share your feelings? And Sadie thinks *her* relationships are complicated.

Over the past six months, since Zia had gone to help my uncle at the First Nome, the bowl had been our only contact. I'd spent so many hours staring into it, talking with Zia, I could hardly remember what she looked like without enchanted oil rippling across her face.

By the time I reached the balcony, I was out of breath. From the surface of the oil, Zia stared up at me. Her arms were crossed; her eyes so angry, they looked like they might ignite. (The first scrying bowl Walt had made actually *did* ignite, but that's another story.)

"Carter," she said, "I'm going to strangle you."

She was beautiful when she threatened to kill me. Over the summer she'd let her hair grow out so that it swept over her shoulders in a glossy black wave. She wasn't the *shabti* I'd first fallen for, but her face still had a sculpted beauty—delicate nose, full red lips, dazzling amber eyes. Her skin glowed like terracotta warm from the kiln.

"You heard about Dallas," I guessed. "Zia, I'm sorry—"

"Carter, *everyone* has heard about Dallas. Other nomes have been sending Amos *ba* messengers for the past hour, demanding answers. Magicians as far away as Cuba felt ripples in the Duat. Some claimed you blew up half of Texas. Some said the entire Fifty-first Nome was destroyed. Some said —some said you were dead."

The concern in her voice lifted my spirits a little, but it also made me feel guiltier.

"I wanted to tell you in advance," I said. "But by the time we realized Apophis's target was Dallas, we had to move immediately."

I told her what had happened at the King Tut exhibit, including our mistakes and casualties.

I tried to read Zia's expression. Even after so many months, it was hard to guess what she was thinking. Just *seeing* her tended to short-circuit my brain. Half the time I could barely remember how to speak in complete sentences.

Finally she muttered something in Arabic—probably a curse.

"I'm glad you survived—but the Fifty-first destroyed…?" She shook her head in disbelief. "I knew Anne Grissom. She taught me healing magic when I was young."

I remembered the pretty blond lady who had played with the band, and the ruined fiddle at the edge of the explosion.

"They were good people," I said.

"Some of our last allies," Zia said. "The rebels are already blaming you for their deaths. If any more nomes desert Amos…"

She didn't have to finish that thought. Last spring, the worst villains in the House of Life had formed a hit squad to destroy Brooklyn House. We'd defeated them. Amos had even given them amnesty when he became the new Chief Lector. But some refused to follow him. The rebels were still out there—gathering strength, turning other magicians against us. As if we needed more enemies.

"They're blaming me?" I asked. "Did they contact you?"

"Worse. They broadcasted a message to you."

The oil rippled. I saw a different face—Sarah Jacobi, leader of the rebels. She had milky skin, spiky black hair, and dark, permanently startled eyes lined with too much kohl. In her pure white robes she looked like a Halloween ghoul.

She stood in a room lined with marble columns. Behind her glowered half a dozen magicians—Jacobi's elite killers. I recognized the blue robes and shaven head of Kwai, who'd been exiled from the North Korean nome for murdering a fellow magician. Next to him stood Petrovich, a scar-faced Ukrainian who'd once worked as an assassin for our old enemy Vlad Menshikov.

The others I couldn't identify, but I doubted that any of them was as bad as Sarah Jacobi herself. Until Menshikov had released her, she'd been exiled in Antarctica for causing an Indian Ocean tsunami that killed more than a quarter of a million people.

"Carter Kane!" she shouted.

Because this was a broadcast, I knew it was just a magical recording, but her voice made me jump.

"The House of Life demands your surrender," she said. "Your crimes are unforgivable. You must pay with your life."

My stomach barely had time to drop before a series of violent images flashed across the oil. I saw the Rosetta Stone exploding in the British Museum—the incident that had unleashed Set and killed my father last Christmas. How had Jacobi gotten a visual of that? I saw the fight at Brooklyn House last spring, when Sadie and I had arrived in Ra's sun boat to drive out Jacobi's hit squad. The images she showed made it look like *we* were the aggressors—a bunch of hooligans with godly powers beating up on poor Jacobi and her friends.

"You released Set and his brethren," Jacobi narrated. "You broke the most sacred rule of magic and cooperated with the gods. In doing so, you unbalanced Ma'at, causing the rise of Apophis."

"That's a lie!" I said. "Apophis was rising anyway!"

Then I remembered I was yelling at a video.

The scenes kept shifting. I saw a high-rise building on fire in the Shibuya district of Tokyo, headquarters of the 234th Nome. A flying demon with the head of a samurai sword crashed through a

window and carried off a screaming magician.

I saw the home of the old Chief Lector, Michel Desjardins—a beautiful Paris townhouse on the rue des Pyramides—now in ruins. The roof had collapsed. The windows were broken. Ripped scrolls and soggy books littered the dead garden, and the hieroglyph for Chaos smoldered on the front door like a cattle brand.

"All this you have caused," Jacobi said. "You have given the Chief Lector's mantle to a servant of evil. You have corrupted young magicians by teaching the path of the gods. You've weakened the House of Life and left us at the mercy of Apophis. We will not stand for this. Any who follow you will be punished."

The vision changed to Sphinx House in London, headquarters for the British nome. Sadie and I had visited there over the summer and managed to make peace with them after hours of negotiations. I saw Kwai storming through the library, smashing statues of the gods and raking books off the shelves. A dozen British magicians stood in chains before their conqueror, Sarah Jacobi, who held a gleaming black knife. The leader of the nome, a harmless old guy named Sir Leicester, was forced to his knees. Sarah Jacobi raised her knife. The blade fell, and the scene shifted.

Jacobi's ghoulish face stared up at me from the surface of the oil. Her eyes were as dark as the sockets of a skull.

"The Kanes are a plague," she said. "You must be destroyed. Surrender yourself and your family for execution. We will spare your other followers as long as they renounce the path of the gods. I do not seek the office of Chief Lector, but I must take it for the good of Egypt. When the Kanes are dead, we will be strong and united again. We will undo the damage you've caused and send the gods and Apophis back to the Duat. Justice comes swiftly, Carter Kane. This will be your only warning."

Sarah Jacobi's image dissolved in the oil, and I was alone again with Zia's reflection.

"Yeah," I said shakily. "For a mass murderer, she's pretty convincing."

Zia nodded. "Jacobi has already turned or defeated most of our allies in Europe and Asia. A lot of the recent attacks—against Paris, Tokyo, Madrid—those were Jacobi's work, but she's blaming them on Apophis—or Brooklyn House."

"That's ridiculous."

"You and I know that," she agreed. "But the magicians are scared. Jacobi is telling them that if the Kanes are destroyed, Apophis will go back to the Duat and things will return to normal. They *want* to believe it. She's telling them that following you is a death sentence. After the destruction of Dallas—"

"I get it," I snapped.

It wasn't fair for me to get mad at Zia, but I felt so helpless. Everything we did seemed to turn out wrong. I imagined Apophis laughing in the Underworld. Maybe that's why he hadn't attacked the House of Life in full force yet. He was having too much fun watching us tear each other apart.

"Why didn't Jacobi direct her message at Amos?" I asked. "He's the Chief Lector."

Zia glanced away as if checking on something. I couldn't see much of her surroundings, but she didn't seem to be in her dorm room at the First Nome, or in the Hall of Ages. "Like Jacobi said, they consider Amos a servant of evil. They won't talk to him."

"Because he was possessed by Set," I guessed. "That wasn't *his* fault. He's been healed. He's fine."

Zia winced.

"What?" I asked. "He *is* fine, isn't he?"

"Carter, it's—it's complicated. Look, the main problem is Jacobi. She's taken over Menshikov's old base in St. Petersburg. It's almost as much of a fortress as the First Nome. We don't know what she's up to or how many magicians she has. We don't know when she'll strike or where. But she's going to attack soon."

Justice comes swiftly. This will be your only warning.

Something told me Jacobi wouldn't attack Brooklyn House again, not after she'd been humiliated last time. But if she wanted to take over the House of Life and destroy the Kanes, what else could her target be?

I locked eyes with Zia, and I realized what she was thinking.

"No," I said. "They'd never attack the First Nome. That would be suicide. It's survived for five thousand years."

"Carter…we're weaker than you realize. We were never fully staffed. Now many of our best magicians have disappeared, possibly gone over to the other side. We've got some old men and a few scared children left, plus Amos and me." She spread her arms in exasperation. "And half the time *I'm* stuck here—"

"Wait," I said. "Where are you?"

Somewhere to Zia's left, a man's voice warbled, "Hell-ooooo!"

Zia sighed. "Great. He's up from his nap."

An old man stuck his face in the scrying bowl. He grinned, showing exactly two teeth. His bald wrinkly head made him look like a geriatric baby. "Zebras are here!"

He opened his mouth and tried to suck the oil out of the bowl, making the whole scene ripple.

"My lord, no!" Zia pulled him back. "You can't drink the enchanted oil. We've talked about this. Here, have a cookie."

"Cookies!" he squealed. "Wheee!" The old man danced off with a tasty treat in his hands.

Zia's senile grandfather? Nope. That was Ra, god of the sun, first divine pharaoh of Egypt and archenemy of Apophis. Last spring we'd gone on a quest to find him and revive him from his twilight sleep, trusting he would rise in all his glory and fight the Chaos snake for us.

Instead, Ra woke up senile and demented. He was excellent at gumming biscuits, drooling, and singing nonsense songs. Fighting Apophis? Not so much.

"You're babysitting *again*?" I asked.

Zia shrugged. "It's after sunrise here. Horus and Isis watch him most nights on the sun boat. But during the day…well, Ra gets upset if I don't come to visit, and none of the other gods want to watch him. Honestly, Carter…" She lowered her voice. "I'm afraid of what they'd do if I left Ra alone with them. They're getting tired of him."

"Wheee!" Ra said in the background.

My heart sank. Yet another thing to feel guilty about: I'd saddled Zia with nanny duty for a sun god. Stuck in the throne room of the gods every day, helping Amos run the First Nome every night, Zia barely had time to sleep, much less go on a date—even if I could get up the courage to ask her.

Of course, that wouldn't matter if Apophis destroyed the world, or if Sarah Jacobi and her magical killers got to me. For a moment I wondered if Jacobi was right—if the world *had* gone sideways because of the Kane family, and if it would be better off without us.

I felt so helpless, I briefly considered calling on the power of Horus. I could've used some of the war god's courage and confidence. But I suspected that joining my thoughts with Horus's wouldn't be a good idea. My emotions were jumbled enough without another voice in my head, egging me on.

"I know that expression," Zia chided. "You can't blame yourself, Carter. If it weren't for you and Sadie, Apophis would have already destroyed the world. There's still hope."

Plan B, I thought. Unless we could figure out this mystery about shadows and how they could be used to fight Apophis, we'd be stuck with Plan B, which meant certain death for Sadie and me even if it worked. But I wasn't going to tell Zia that. She didn't need any more depressing news.

"You're right," I said. "We'll figure out something."

"I'll be back at the First Nome tonight. Call me then, okay? We should talk about—"

Something rumbled behind her, like a stone slab grinding across the floor.

"Sobek's here," she whispered. "I hate that guy. Talk later."

"Wait, Zia," I said. "Talk about what?"

But the oil turned dark, and Zia was gone.

I needed to sleep. Instead, I paced my room.

The dorm rooms at Brooklyn House were amazing—comfortable beds, HD TVs, high-speed wireless Internet, and magically restocking mini-fridges. An army of enchanted brooms, mops, and dusters kept everything tidy. The closets were always full of clean, perfectly fitting clothes.

Still, my room felt like a cage. Maybe that's because I had a baboon for a roommate. Khufu wasn't here much (usually downstairs with Cleo or letting the ankle-biters groom his fur), but there was a baboon-shaped depression on his bed, a box of Cheerios on the nightstand, and a tire swing installed in the corner of the room. Sadie had done that last part as a joke, but Khufu loved it so much, I couldn't take it down. The thing was, I'd gotten used to his being around. Now that he spent most of his time with the kindergartners, I missed him. He'd grown on me in an endearing, annoying way, kind of like my sister.

[Yeah, Sadie. You saw that one coming.]

Screensaver pictures floated across my laptop monitor. There was my dad at a dig site in Egypt, looking relaxed and in charge in his khaki fatigues, his sleeves rolled up on his dark muscular arms as he showed off the broken stone head of some pharaoh's statue. Dad's bald scalp and goatee made him look slightly devilish when he smiled.

Another picture showed Uncle Amos onstage at a jazz club, playing his saxophone. He wore round dark glasses, a blue porkpie hat, and a matching silk suit, impeccably tailored as always. His cornrows were braided with sapphires. I'd never actually seen Amos play onstage, but I liked this photo because he looked so energetic and happy—not like he did these days, with the weight of leadership on his shoulders. Unfortunately the photo also reminded me of Anne Grissom, the Texas magician with her fiddle, having so much fun earlier this evening just before she died.

The screensaver changed. I saw my mom bouncing me on her knee when I was a baby. I had this ridiculous 'fro back then, which Sadie always teases me about. In the photo, I'm wearing a blue

Onesie stained with pureed yams. I'm holding my mom's thumbs, looking startled as she bounces me up and down, like I'm thinking, *Get me off of this ride!* My mom is as beautiful as always, even in an old T-shirt and jeans, her hair tied back in a bandana. She smiles down at me like I'm the most wonderful thing in her life.

That photo hurt to look at, but I kept looking at it.

I remembered what Sadie had told me—that something was affecting the spirits of the dead, and we might not see our mom again unless we figured it out.

I took a deep breath. My dad, my uncle, my mom—all of them powerful magicians. All had sacrificed so much to restore the House of Life.

They were older, wiser, and stronger than me. They'd had decades to practice magic. Sadie and I had had nine months. Yet we needed to do something no magician had ever managed—defeat Apophis himself.

I went to my closet and took down my old traveling case. It was just a black leather carry-on bag, like a million others you might see in an airport. For years I'd lugged it around the world as I traveled with my dad. He'd trained me to live with only the possessions I could carry.

I opened the suitcase. It was empty now except for one thing: a statuette of a coiled serpent carved in red granite, engraved with hieroglyphs. The name—*Apophis*—was crossed out and overwritten with powerful binding spells, but still this statuette was the most dangerous object in the whole house—a representation of the enemy.

Sadie, Walt, and I had made this thing in secret (over Bast's strong objections). We'd only trusted Walt because we needed his charm-making skills. Not even Amos would have approved such a dangerous experiment. One mistake, one miscast spell, and this statue could turn from a weapon against Apophis into a gateway allowing him free access to Brooklyn House. But we'd had to take the risk. Unless we found some other means of defeating the serpent, Sadie and I would have to use this statue for Plan B.

"Foolish idea," said a voice from the balcony.

A pigeon was perched on the railing. There was something very un-pigeonlike about its stare. It looked fearless, almost dangerous; and I recognized that voice, which was more manly and warlike than you'd normally expect from a member of the dove family.

"Horus?" I asked.

The pigeon bobbed its head. "May I come in?"

I knew he wasn't just asking out of courtesy. The house was heavily enchanted to keep out unwanted pests like rodents, termites, and Egyptian gods.

"I give you permission to enter," I said formally. "Horus, in the form of a…uh…pigeon."

"Thank you." The pigeon hopped off the railing and waddled inside.

"Why?" I asked.

Horus ruffled his feathers. "Well, I looked for a falcon, but they're a little scarce in New York. I wanted something with wings, so a pigeon seemed the best choice. They've adapted well to cities, aren't scared of people. They're noble birds, don't you think?"

"Noble," I agreed. "That's the first word that comes to mind when I think of pigeons."

"Indeed," Horus said.

Apparently sarcasm didn't exist in Ancient Egypt, because Horus never seemed to get it. He fluttered onto my bed and pecked at a few Cheerios left over from Khufu's lunch.

"Hey," I warned, "if you poop on my blankets—"

"Please. War gods do not poop on blankets. Well, except for that one time—"

"Forget I said anything."

Horus hopped to the edge of my suitcase. He peered down at the statuette of Apophis. "Dangerous," he said. "Much too dangerous, Carter."

I hadn't told him about Plan B, but I wasn't surprised that he knew. Horus and I had shared minds too many times. The better I got at channeling his powers, the better we understood each other. The downside of godly magic was that I couldn't always shut off that connection.

"It's our emergency backup," I said. "We're trying to find another way."

"By looking for that scroll," he recalled. "The last copy of which burned up tonight in Dallas."

I resisted the urge to spike the pigeon. "Yes. But Sadie found this shadow box. She thinks it's some sort of clue. You wouldn't know anything about using shadows against Apophis, would you?"

The pigeon turned its head sideways. "Not really. My understanding of magic is fairly straightforward. Hit enemies with a sword until they're dead. If they rise again, hit them again. Repeat as necessary. It worked against Set."

"After how many years of fighting?"

The pigeon glared at me. "What's your point?"

I decided to avoid an argument. Horus was a war god. He loved to fight, but it had taken him years to defeat Set, the god of evil. And Set was small stuff next to Apophis—the primordial force of Chaos. Whacking Apophis with a sword wasn't going to work.

I thought about something Bast had said earlier, in the library.

"Would Thoth know more about shadows?" I asked.

"Probably," Horus grumbled. "Thoth isn't good for much except studying his musty old scrolls." He regarded the serpent figurine. "Funny…I just remembered something. Back in the old days, the Egyptians used the same word for *statue* and *shadow*, because they're both smaller copies of an object. They were both called a *sheut*."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

The pigeon ruffled its feathers. "Nothing. It just occurred to me, looking at that statue while you were talking about shadows."

An icy feeling spread between my shoulder blades.

Shadows…statues.

Last spring Sadie and I had watched as the old Chief Lector Desjardins cast an execration spell on Apophis. Even against minor demons, execration spells were dangerous. You're supposed to destroy a small statue of the target and, in doing so, utterly destroy the target itself, erasing it from the world. Make a mistake, and things start exploding—including the magician who cast it.

Down in the Underworld, Desjardins had used a makeshift figurine against Apophis. The Chief Lector had died casting the execration, and had only managed to push Apophis a little deeper into the Duat.

Sadie and I hoped that with a more powerful magic statue, both of us working together might be able to execrate Apophis completely, or at least throw him so deep into the Duat that he'd never return.

That was Plan B. But we knew such a powerful spell would tap so much energy, it would cost us our lives. Unless we found another way.

Statues as shadows, shadows as statues.

Plan C began forming in my mind—an idea so crazy, I didn't want to put it into words.

"Horus," I said carefully, "does Apophis have a shadow?"

The pigeon blinked its red eyes. "What a question! Why would you…?" He glanced down at the red statue. "Oh…*Oh.* That's clever, actually. Certifiably insane, but clever. You think Setne's version of the Book of Overcoming Apophis, the one Apophis was so anxious to destroy…you think it contained a secret spell for—"

"I don't know," I said. "It's worth asking Thoth. Maybe he knows something."

"Maybe," Horus said grudgingly. "But I still think a frontal assault is the way to go."

"Of course you do."

The pigeon bobbed its head. "We are strong enough, you and I. We should combine forces, Carter. Let me share your form as I once did. We could lead the armies of gods and men and defeat the serpent. Together, we'll rule the world."

The idea might have been more tempting if I hadn't been looking at a plump bird with Cheerio dust on its plumage. Letting the pigeon rule the world sounded like a bad idea.

"I'll get back to you on that," I said. "First, I should talk to Thoth."

"Bah." Horus flapped his wings. "He's still in Memphis, at that ridiculous sports stadium of his. But if you plan on seeing him, I wouldn't wait too long."

"Why not?"

"That's what I came to tell you," Horus said. "Matters are getting complicated among the gods. Apophis is dividing us, attacking us one by one, just as he's doing with you magicians. Thoth was the first to suffer."

"Suffer…how?"

The pigeon puffed up. A wisp of smoke curled from its beak. "Oh, dear. My host is self-destructing. It can't hold my spirit for much longer. Just hurry, Carter. I'm having trouble keeping the gods together, and that old man Ra isn't helping our morale. If you and I don't lead our armies soon, we may not have any armies left to lead."

"But—"

The pigeon hiccupped another wisp of smoke. "Gotta go. Good luck."

Horus flew out the window, leaving me alone with the statuette of Apophis and a few gray feathers.

I slept like a mummy. That was the good part. The bad part was that Bast let me sleep until the afternoon.

"Why didn't you wake me up?" I demanded. "I've got things to do!"

Bast spread her hands. "Sadie insisted. You had a rough night last night. She said you needed your rest. Besides, I'm a cat. I respect the sanctity of sleep."

I was still mad, but part of me knew Sadie was right. I'd expended a lot of magical energy the previous night and had gone to sleep really late. Maybe—just maybe—Sadie had my best interests at heart.

(I just caught her making faces at me, so maybe not.)

I showered and dressed. By the time the other kids got back from school, I was feeling almost human again.

Yes, I said *school*, as in normal old school. We'd spent last spring tutoring all the initiates at Brooklyn House, but with the start of the fall semester, Bast had decided that the kids could use a dose of regular mortal life. Now they went to a nearby academy in Brooklyn during the day and learned magic in the afternoons and on weekends.

I was the only one who stayed behind. I'd *always* been homeschooled. The idea of dealing with lockers, schedules, textbooks, and cafeteria food on top of running the Twenty-first Nome was just too much for me.

You'd think the other kids would have complained, especially Sadie. But, in fact, attending school was working out okay for them. The girls were happy to have more friends (and less dorky boys to flirt with, they claimed). The guys could play sports with actual teams rather than one-on-one with Khufu using Egyptian statues for hoops. As for Bast, she was happy to have a quiet house so she could stretch out on the floor and snooze in the sunlight.

At any rate, by the time the others got home, I'd done a lot of thinking about my conversations with Zia and Horus. The plan I'd formulated last night still seemed crazy, but I decided that it might be our best shot. After briefing Sadie and Bast, who (disturbingly) agreed with me, we decided it was time to tell the rest of our friends.

We gathered for dinner on the main terrace. It's a nice place to eat, with invisible barriers that keep out the wind, and a great view of the East River and Manhattan. The food magically appeared, and it was always tasty. Still, I dreaded eating on the terrace. For nine months we'd had all our important meetings there. I'd come to associate sit-down dinners with disasters.

We filled up our plates from the buffet as our guardian albino crocodile Philip of Macedonia splashed happily in his swimming pool. Eating next to a twenty-foot-long crocodile took some getting used to, but Philip was well trained. He only ate bacon, stray waterfowl, and the occasional invading monster.

Bast sat at the head of the table with a can of Purina Fancy Feast. Sadie and I sat together at the opposite end. Khufu was off babysitting the ankle-biters, and some of our newer recruits were inside doing their homework or catching up on spell crafting, but most of our main people were present—a dozen senior initiates.

Considering how badly last night had turned out, everyone seemed in strangely good spirits. I was kind of glad they didn't yet know about Sarah Jacobi's video death threat. Julian kept bouncing in his chair and grinning for no particular reason. Cleo and Jaz were whispering together and giggling. Even Felix seemed to have recovered from his shock in Dallas. He was sculpting tiny *shabti* penguins out of his mashed potatoes and bringing them to life.

Only Walt looked glum. The big guy had nothing on his dinner plate except three carrots and a

wedge of Jell-O. (Khufu insisted Jell-O had major healing properties.) Judging from the tightness around Walt's eyes and the stiffness of his movements, I guessed his pain was even worse than last night.

I turned to Sadie. "What's going on? Everybody seems…distracted."

She stared at me. "I keep forgetting you don't go to school. Carter, it's the first dance tonight! Three other schools will be there. We *can* hurry up the meeting, can't we?"

"You're kidding," I said. "I'm thinking about plans for Doomsday, and you're worried about being late to a dance?"

"I've mentioned it to you a dozen times," she insisted. "Besides, we need something to boost our spirits. Now, tell everyone your plan. Some of us still have to decide what to wear."

I wanted to argue, but the others were looking at me expectantly.

I cleared my throat. "Okay. I know there's a dance, but—"

"At seven," Jaz said. "You *are* coming, right?"

She smiled at me. Was she…flirting?

(Sadie just called me dense. Hey, I had other things on my mind.)

"Uh…so anyway," I stammered. "We need to talk about what happened in Dallas, and what happens next."

That killed the mood. The smiles faded. My friends listened as I reviewed our mission to the Fifty-first Nome, the destruction of the Book of Overcoming Apophis, and the retrieval of the shadow box. I told them about Sarah Jacobi's demand for my surrender, and the turmoil among the gods that Horus had mentioned.

Sadie stepped in. She explained her weird encounter with the face in the wall, two gods, and our ghost mother. She shared her gut feeling that our best chance to defeat Apophis had something to do with shadows.

Cleo raised her hand. "So…the rebel magicians have a death warrant out for you. The gods can't help us. Apophis could arise at any time, and the last scroll that might've helped us to defeat him has been destroyed. But we shouldn't worry, because we have an empty box and a vague hunch about shadows."

"Why, Cleo," Bast said with admiration. "You have a catty side!"

I pressed my hands against the surface of the table. It would've taken very little effort to summon the strength of Horus and smash it to kindling. But I doubted that would help my reputation as a calm, collected leader.

"This is more than a vague hunch," I said. "Look, you've all learned about execration spells, right?"

Our crocodile, Philip, grunted. He slapped the pool with his tail and made it rain on our dinner. Magical creatures are a little sensitive about the word *execration*.

Julian dabbed the water off his grilled cheese sandwich. "Dude, you can't execrate Apophis. He's *massive*. Desjardins tried it and got killed."

"I know," I said. "With a standard execration, you destroy a statue that represents the enemy. But what if you could crank up the spell by destroying a more powerful representation—something more connected to Apophis?"

Walt sat forward, suddenly interested. “His shadow?”

Felix was so startled he dropped his spoon, crushing one of his mashed-potato penguins. “Wait, what?”

“I got the idea from Horus,” I said. “He told me statues were called shadows in ancient times.”

“But that was just, like, symbolic,” Alyssa said. “Wasn’t it?”

Bast set down her empty Fancy Feast can. She still looked nervous about the whole topic of shadows, but when I’d explained to her that it was either this or Sadie and me dying, she’d agreed to support us.

“Maybe not,” the cat goddess said. “I’m no expert on execration, mind you. Nasty business. But it’s possible that a statue used for execration was originally meant to represent the target’s shadow, which is an important part of the soul.”

“So,” Sadie said, “we could cast an execration spell on Apophis, but instead of destroying a statue, we could destroy his actual shadow. Brilliant, eh?”

“That’s nuts,” Julian said. “How do you destroy a shadow?”

Walt shooed a mashed-potato penguin away from his Jell-O. “It’s not nuts. Sympathetic magic is all about using a small copy to manipulate the actual target. It’s possible the whole tradition of making little statues to represent people and gods—maybe at one time those statues actually *contained* the target’s *sheut*. There are lots of stories about the souls of the gods inhabiting statues. If a shadow was trapped in a statue, you might be able to destroy it.”

“Could you make a statue like that?” Alyssa asked. “Something that could bind the shadow of… of Apophis himself?”

“Maybe.” Walt glanced at me. Most of the folks at the table didn’t know we’d already made a statue of Apophis that might work for that purpose. “Even if I could, we’d need to find the shadow. Then we’d need some pretty advanced magic to capture it and destroy it.”

“Find a shadow?” Felix smiled nervously, like he hoped we were joking. “Wouldn’t it be right *under* him? And how do you capture it? Step on it? Shine a light on it?”

“It’ll be more complicated than that,” I said. “This ancient magician Setne, the guy who wrote his own version of the Book of Overcoming Apophis, I think he must have created a spell to catch and destroy shadows. That’s why Apophis was so anxious to burn the evidence. That’s his secret weakness.”

“But the scroll is gone,” Cleo said.

“There’s still someone we can ask,” Walt said. “Thoth. If anyone knows the answers, he will.”

The tension around the table seemed to ease. At least we’d given our initiates something to hope for, even if it was a long shot. I was grateful we had Walt on our side. His charm-making ability might be our only hope of binding a shadow to the statue, and his vote of confidence carried weight with the other kids.

“We need to visit Thoth right away,” I said. “Tonight.”

“Yes,” Sadie agreed. “Right after the dance.”

I glared at her. “You aren’t serious.”

“Oh, yes, brother dear.” She smiled mischievously, and for a second I was afraid she might invoke my secret name and force me to obey. “We’re attending the dance tonight. And you’re coming

with us.”

SADIE

5. A Dance with Death

CHEERS, CARTER. At least you have the sense to hand me the microphone for *important* things.

Honestly, he drones on and on about his plans for the Apocalypse, but he makes no plans at all for the school dance. My brother's priorities are severely skewed.

I don't think I was being selfish wanting to go to the dance. Of *course* we had serious business to deal with. That's exactly why I insisted on partying first. Our initiates needed a morale boost. They needed a chance to be normal kids, to have friends and lives outside Brooklyn House—something worth fighting for. Even armies in the field fight better when they take breaks for entertainment. I'm sure some general somewhere has said that.

By sunset, I was ready to lead my troops into battle. I'd picked out quite a nice black strapless dress and put black lowlights in my blond hair, with just a touch of dark makeup for that risen-from-the-grave look. I wore simple flats for dancing (despite what Carter says, I do not wear combat boots all the time; just ninety percent of the time), the silver *tyet* amulet from my mother's jewelry box, and the pendant Walt had given me for my last birthday with the Egyptian symbol of eternity, *shen*.

Walt had an identical amulet among his own collection of talismans, which provided us a magic line of communication, and even the ability to summon the other person to our side in emergencies.

Unfortunately, the *shen* amulets didn't mean we were dating exclusively. Or even dating at all. If Walt had *asked* me, I think I would've been fine with it. Walt was so kind and gorgeous—perfect, really, in his own way. Perhaps if he'd asserted himself a bit more, I would've fallen for him and been able to let go of that *other* boy, the godly one.

But Walt was dying. He had this silly idea that it would be unfair to me if we started a relationship under those circumstances. As if that would stop me. So we were stuck in this maddening limbo—flirting, talking for hours, a few times even sharing a kiss when we let our guard down—but eventually Walt would always pull away and shut me out.

Why couldn't things be simple?

I bring this up because I literally ran into Walt as I was coming down the stairs.

"Oh!" I said. Then I noticed he was still wearing his old muscle shirt, jeans, and no shoes. "You're not ready yet?"

"I'm not going," he announced.

My mouth fell open. "What? Why?"

"Sadie…you and Carter will need me when you visit Thoth. If I'm going to make it, I have to rest."

"But…" I forced myself to stop. It wasn't right for me to pressure him. I didn't need magic to see that he really was in great pain.

Centuries of magical healing knowledge at our disposal, yet nothing we tried seemed to help Walt. I ask you: What's the point of being a magician if you can't wave your wand and make the people you care about feel better?

"Right," I said. "I—I was just hoping…"

Anything I said would've sounded bratty. I wanted to dance with him. Gods of Egypt, I'd *dressed up* for him. The mortal boys at school were all right, I suppose, but they seemed quite shallow compared to Walt (or, yes, fine—compared to Anubis). As for the other boys of Brooklyn House—dancing with them would have made me feel a bit odd, like I was dancing with my cousins.

"I could stay," I offered, but I suppose I didn't sound very convincing.

Walt managed a faint smile. "No, go, Sadie. Really. I'm sure I'll be feeling better when you get back. Have a good time."

He brushed past me and climbed the steps.

I took several deep breaths. Part of me did want to stay and look after him. Going without him didn't seem right.

Then I glanced down into the Great Room. The older kids were joking and talking, ready to leave. If *I* didn't go, they might feel obliged to stay too.

Something like wet cement settled in my stomach. All the joy and excitement suddenly went out of the evening for me. For months I'd been struggling to adjust to life in New York after so many years in London. I'd been forced to balance life as a young magician with the challenges of being an ordinary schoolgirl. Now, just when this dance had seemed to offer me a chance to combine both worlds and have a lovely night out, my hopes were dashed. I'd still have to go and pretend to have fun. But I'd only be doing it out of duty, to make the others feel better.

I wondered if this was what being a grown-up felt like. Horrible.

The only thing that cheered me up was Carter. He emerged from his room dressed like a junior professor, in a coat and tie, button-down shirt, and trousers. Poor boy—of course he'd never been to a dance any more than he'd been to school. He had no clue whatsoever.

"You look…wonderful." I tried to keep a straight face. "You do realize it's not a funeral?"

"Shut up," he grumbled. "Let's get this over with."

The school the kids and I attended was Brooklyn Academy for the Gifted. Everyone called it BAG. We had no end of jokes about this. The students were Baggies. The glamour girls with nose jobs and Botox lips were Plastic Bags. Our alumni were Old Bags. And, naturally, our headmistress, Mrs. Laird, was the Bag Lady.

Despite the name, the school was quite nice. All the students were gifted in some sort of art, music, or drama. Our schedules were flexible, with lots of independent study time, which worked perfectly for us magicians. We could pop off to battle monsters as needed; and, as magicians, it wasn't difficult for us to pass ourselves off as gifted. Alyssa used her earth magic to make sculptures. Walt specialized in jewelry. Cleo was an amazing writer, since she could retell stories that had been forgot since the days of Ancient Egypt. As for me, I needed no magic. I was a natural at drama.

[Stop laughing, Carter.]

You might not expect this in the middle of Brooklyn, but our campus was like a park, with acres of green lawns, well-tended trees and hedges, even a small lake with ducks and swans.

The dance was held in the pavilion in front of the administration building. A band played in the gazebo. Lights were strung in the trees. Teacher chaperones walked the perimeter on "bush patrol," making sure none of the older students sneaked off into the shrubbery.

I tried not to think about it, but the music and crowd reminded me of Dallas the night before—a very different sort of party, which had ended badly. I remembered JD Grissom clasping my hand, wishing me luck before he ran off to save his wife.

Horrible guilt welled inside me. I forced it down. It wouldn't do the Grissoms any good for me to start crying in the middle of the dance. It certainly wouldn't help my friends enjoy themselves.

As our group dispersed into the crowd, I turned to Carter, who was fiddling with his tie.

"Right," I said. "You need to dance."

Carter looked at me in horror. "What?"

I called over one of my mortal friends, a lovely girl named Lacy. She was a year younger than I, so she looked up to me greatly. (I know, it's hard not to.) She had cute blond pigtails, a mouthful of braces, and was possibly the only person at the dance *more* nervous than my brother. She'd seen pictures of Carter before, however, and seemed to find him *hot*. I didn't hold that against her. In most ways, she had excellent taste.

"Lacy—Carter," I introduced them.

"You look like your pictures!" Lacy grinned. The bands of her braces were alternating pink and white to match her dress.

Carter said, "Uh—"

"He doesn't know how to dance," I told Lacy. "I'd be ever so grateful if you'd teach him."

"Sure!" she squealed. She grabbed my brother's hand and swept him away.

I started to feel better. Perhaps I could have fun tonight, after all.

Then I turned and found myself face-to-face with one of my *not*-so-favorite mortals—Drew Tanaka, head of the popular girl clique, with her supermodel goon squad in tow.

"Sadie!" Drew threw her arm around me. Her perfume was a mixture of roses and tear gas. "So glad you're here, sweetie. If I'd known you were coming, you could've ridden in the limo with us!"

Her friends made sympathetic "Aww" sounds and grinned to show they were not at all sincere. They were dressed more or less the same, in the latest silky designer bits their parents had no doubt commissioned for them during the last Fashion Week. Drew was the tallest and most glamorous (I use the word as an insult) with awful pink eyeliner and frizzy black curls that were apparently Drew's own personal crusade to bring back the 1980s perm. She wore a pendant—a glittering platinum and diamond *D*—possibly her initial, or her grade average.

I gave her a tight smile. "A limo, wow. Thanks for that. But between you, your friends, and your egos, I doubt there would've been extra room."

Drew pouted. "That's not nice, hon! Where is Walt? Is the poor baby still sick?"

Behind her, some of the girls coughed into their fists, mimicking Walt.

I wanted to pull my staff from the Duat and turn them all into worms for the ducks. I was pretty sure I could manage that, and I doubted anyone would miss them, but I kept my temper.

Lacy had warned me about Drew the first day of school. Apparently the two of them had gone to some summer camp together—blah, blah, I didn't really listen to the details—and Drew had been just as much of a tyrant there.

That did not, however, mean she could be a tyrant with *me*.

"Walt's at home," I said. "I *did* tell him you'd be here. Funny, that didn't seem to motivate him much."

"What a shame," Drew sighed. "You know, maybe he's not really sick. He might just be allergic to you, hon. That does happen. I should go to his place with some chicken soup or something. Where does he live?"

She smiled sweetly. I didn't know if she actually fancied Walt or if she just pretended because she hated me. Either way, the idea of turning her into an earthworm was becoming more appealing.

Before I could do anything rash, a familiar voice behind me said, "Hello, Sadie."

The other girls let out a collective gasp. My pulse quickened from "slow walk" to "fifty-meter dash." I turned and found that—yes, indeed—the god Anubis had crashed our dance.

He had the nerve to look amazing, as usual. He's *so* annoying that way. He wore skinny black trousers with black leather boots, and a biker's jacket over an Arcade Fire T-shirt. His dark hair was naturally disheveled as if he'd just woken up, and I fought the urge to run my fingers through it. His brown eyes glittered with amusement. Either he was happy to see me, or he enjoyed seeing me flustered.

"Oh…my…god," Drew whimpered. "Who…"

Anubis ignored her (bless him for that) and held out his elbow for me—a sweet old-fashioned gesture. "May I have this dance?"

"I suppose," I said, as noncommittally as I could.

I looped my arm through his, and we left the Plastic Bags behind us, all of them muttering, "Oh my god! Oh my god!"

No, actually, I wanted to say. *He's* my *amazingly hot boy god. Find your own.*

The uneven paving stones made for a dangerous dance floor. All around us, kids were tripping over each other. Anubis didn't help matters, as all the girls turned and gawked at him as he led me through the crowd.

I was glad Anubis had my arm. My emotions were so jumbled, I felt dizzy. I was ridiculously happy that he was here. I felt crushingly guilty that poor Walt was at home alone while I strolled arm in arm with Anubis. But I was relieved that Walt and Anubis weren't both here together. That would've been *beyond* awkward. The relief made me feel guiltier, and so on. Gods of Egypt, I was a mess.

As we reached the middle of the dance floor, the band suddenly switched from a dance number to a love ballad.

"Was that your doing?" I asked Anubis.

He smiled, which wasn't much of an answer. He put one hand on my hip and clasped my other hand, like a proper gentleman. We swayed together.

I'd heard of dancing on air, but it took me a few steps to realize we were actually levitating—a few millimeters off the ground, not enough for anyone to notice, just enough for us to glide across the

stones while others stumbled.

A few meters away, Carter looked quite awkward as Lacy showed him how to slow-dance. [Really, Carter, it isn't quantum physics.]

I gazed up at Anubis's warm brown eyes and his exquisite lips. He'd kissed me once—for my birthday, last spring—and I'd never quite got over it. You'd think a god of death would have cold lips, but that wasn't the case at all.

I tried to clear my head. I knew Anubis must be here for some reason, but it was awfully hard to focus.

"I thought…Um," I gulped and barely managed not to drool on myself.

Oh, brilliant, Sadie, I thought. *Let's try for a complete sentence, now, shall we?*

"I thought you could only appear in places of death," I said.

Anubis laughed gently. "This *is* a place of death, Sadie. The Battle of Brooklyn Heights, 1776. Hundreds of American and British troops died right where we're dancing."

"How romantic," I muttered. "So we're dancing on their graves?"

Anubis shook his head. "Most never received proper burials. That's why I decided to visit you here. These ghosts could use a night of entertainment, just like your initiates."

Suddenly, spirits were twirling all around us—luminous apparitions in eighteenth-century clothes. Some wore the red uniforms of British regulars. Others had ragtag militia outfits. They pirouetted with lady ghosts in plain farm dresses or fancy silk. A few of the posh women had piles of curly hair that would have made even Drew jealous. The ghosts seemed to be dancing to a different song. I strained my ears and could faintly hear violins and a cello.

None of the regular mortals seemed to notice the spectral invasion. Even my friends from Brooklyn House were oblivious. I watched as a ghostly couple waltzed straight through Carter and Lacy. As Anubis and I danced, Brooklyn Academy seemed to fade and the ghosts became more real.

One soldier had a musket wound in his chest. A British officer had a tomahawk sticking out of his powdered wig. We danced between worlds, waltzing side by side with smiling, gruesomely slaughtered phantoms. Anubis certainly knew how to show a girl a good time.

"You're doing it again," I said. "Taking me out of phase, or whatever you call it."

"A little," he admitted. "We need privacy to talk. I promised you I'd visit in person—"

"And you did."

"—but it's going to cause trouble. This may be the last time I can see you. There's been grumbling about our situation."

I narrowed my eyes. Was the god of the dead blushing?

"Our situation," I repeated.

"Us."

The word set my ears buzzing. I tried to keep my voice even. "As far as I'm aware, there *is* no official 'us.' Why would this be the last time we can talk?"

He was definitely blushing now. "Please, just listen. There's so much I need to tell you. Your brother has the right idea. The shadow of Apophis is your best hope, but only one person can teach you the magic you need. Thoth may guide you somewhat, but I doubt he'll reveal the secret spells. It's

too dangerous."

"Hold on, hold on." I was still reeling from the comment about *us*. And the idea that this might be the last time I saw Anubis.… That sent my brain cells into panic mode, thousands of tiny Sadies running around in my skull, screaming and waving their arms.

I tried to focus. "You mean Apophis *does* have a shadow? It could be used to execrate—"

"Please don't use that word." Anubis grimaced. "But yes, all intelligent entities have souls, so all of them have shadows, even Apophis. I know this much, being the guide of the dead. I have to make souls my business. Could his shadow be used against him? In theory, yes. But there are many dangers."

"Naturally."

Anubis twirled me through a pair of colonial ghosts. Other students watched us, whispering as we danced, but their voices sounded distant and distorted, as if they were on the far side of a waterfall.

Anubis studied me with a sort of tender regret. "Sadie, I wouldn't set you on this path if there was another way. I don't want you to die."

"I can agree with that," I said.

"Even *talking* about this sort of magic is forbidden," he warned. "But you need to know what you're dealing with. The *sheut* is the least understood part of the soul. It's…how to explain…a soul of last resort, an afterimage of the person's life force. You've heard that the souls of the wicked are destroyed in the Hall of Judgment—"

"When Ammit devours their hearts," I said.

"Yes." Anubis lowered his voice. "We say that this completely destroys the soul. But that's not true. The shadow lingers. Occasionally, not often, Osiris has decided to, ah, *review* a judgment. If someone was found guilty, but new evidence comes to light, there must be a way to retrieve a soul from oblivion."

I tried to grasp that. My thoughts felt suspended in midair like my feet, not able to connect with anything solid. "So…you're saying the shadow could be used to, um, *reboot* a soul? Like a computer's backup drive?"

Anubis looked at me strangely.

"Ugh, I'm sorry." I sighed. "I've been spending too much time with my geeky brother. He speaks like a computer."

"No, no," Anubis said. "It's actually a good analogy. I'd just never thought of it that way. Yes, the soul isn't completely destroyed until the shadow is destroyed, so in extreme cases, with the right magic, it's possible to reboot the soul using the *sheut*. Conversely, if you were to destroy a god's shadow, or even Apophis's shadow as part of an ex—um, the sort of spell you mentioned—"

"The *sheut* would be infinitely more powerful than a regular statue," I guessed. "We could destroy him, possibly without destroying ourselves."

Anubis glanced around us nervously. "Yes, but you can see why this sort of magic is secret. The gods would never want such knowledge in the hands of a mortal magician. This is why we always hide our shadows. If a magician were able to capture a god's *sheut* and use it to threaten us—"

"Right." My mouth felt dry. "But I'm on your side. I'd only use the spell on Apophis. Surely

Thoth will understand that."

"Perhaps." Anubis didn't sound convinced. "Start with Thoth, at least. Hopefully he'll see the need to assist you. I fear, though, you may still need better guidance—more *dangerous* guidance."

I gulped. "You said only one person could teach us the magic. Who?"

"The only magician crazy enough to ever research such a spell. His trial is tomorrow at sunset. You'll have to visit your father before then."

"Wait. What?"

Wind blew through the pavilion. Anubis's hand tightened on mine.

"We have to hurry," he said. "There's more I need to tell you. Something is happening with the spirits of dead. They're being… Look, there!"

He pointed to a pair of nearby specters. The woman danced barefoot in a simple white linen dress. The man wore breeches and a frock coat like a Colonial farmer, but his neck was canted at a funny angle, as if he'd been hanged. Black mist coiled around the man's legs like ivy. Another three waltz steps, and he was completely engulfed. The murky tendrils pulled him into the ground, and he disappeared. The woman in white kept dancing by herself, apparently unaware that her partner had been consumed by evil fingers of smog.

"What—what was *that*?" I asked.

"We don't know," Anubis said. "As Apophis grows stronger, it's happening more frequently. Souls of the dead are disappearing, being drawn farther down into the Duat. We don't know where they're going."

I almost stumbled. "My mother. Is she all right?"

Anubis gave me a pained look, and I knew the answer. Mum had warned me—we might never see her again unless we discovered a way to defeat Apophis. She'd sent me that message urging me to find the serpent's shadow. It *had* to be connected to her dilemma somehow.

"She's missing," I guessed. My heart pounded against my ribs. "It's got something to do with this business about shadows, hasn't it?"

"Sadie, I wish I knew. Your father is—he's trying his best to find her, but—"

The wind interrupted him.

Have you ever stuck your hand out of a moving car and felt the air push against you? It was a bit like that, but ten times more powerful. A wedge of force pushed Anubis and me apart. I staggered backward, my feet no longer levitating.

"Sadie…" Anubis reached out, but the wind pushed him farther away.

"Stop that!" said a squeaky voice between us. "No public displays of affection on *my* watch!"

The air took on human form. At first it was just a faint silhouette. Then it became more solid and colorful. Before me stood a man in an old-fashioned aviator's outfit—leather helmet, goggles, scarf, and a bomber's jacket, like photos I'd seen of the Royal Air Force pilots during World War II. He wasn't flesh and blood, though. His form swirled and shifted. I realized he was put together from blown rubbish: specks of dirt, scraps of paper, bits of dandelion fuzz, dried leaves—all churning about, but held together in such a tight collage by the wind that from a distance he might have passed for a normal mortal.

He wagged his finger at Anubis. "This is the final insult, boy!" His voice hissed like air from a

balloon. "You have been warned *numerous* times."

"Hold on!" I said. "Who are you? And Anubis is hardly a boy. He's five thousand years old."

"Exactly," the aviator snapped. "A mere child. And I didn't give you permission to speak, girl!"

The aviator exploded. The blast was so powerful, my ears popped and I fell on my bum. Around me, the other mortals—my friends, teachers, and all the students—simply collapsed. Anubis and the ghosts seemed unaffected. The aviator formed again, glaring down at me.

I struggled to my feet and tried to summon my staff from the Duat. No such luck.

"What have you done?" I demanded.

"Sadie, it's all right," Anubis said. "Your friends are only unconscious. Shu just lowered the air pressure."

"Shoe?" I demanded. "Shoe who?"

Anubis pressed his fingers to his temples. "Sadie…this is Shu, my great-grandfather."

Then it struck me: Shu was one of those ridiculous godly names I'd heard before. I tried to place it. "Ah. The god of…flip-flops. No, wait. Leaky balloons. No—"

"Air!" Shu hissed. "God of the air!"

His body dissolved into a tornado of debris. When he formed again, he was in Ancient Egyptian costume—bare-chested with a white loincloth and a giant ostrich feather sprouting from his braided headband.

He changed back into RAF clothes.

"Stick with the pilot's outfit," I said. "The ostrich feather really doesn't work for you."

Shu made an unfriendly whooshing sound. "I'd *prefer* to be invisible, thank you very much. But you mortals have polluted the air so badly, it's getting harder and harder. It's *dreadful* what you've done, the last few millennia! Haven't you people heard of 'Spare the Air' days? Carpooling? Hybrid engines? And don't get me started on cows. Did you know that every cow belches and farts over a hundred gallons of methane a day? There are one and a half billion cows in the world. Do you have *any* idea what that does to my respiratory system?"

"Uh…"

From his jacket pocket, Shu produced an inhaler and puffed on it. "Shocking!"

I raised an eyebrow at Anubis, who looked mortally embarrassed (or perhaps immortally embarrassed).

"Shu," he said. "We were just talking. If you'll let us finish—"

"Oh, *talking*!" Shu bellowed, no doubt releasing his own share of methane. "While holding hands, and dancing, and other degenerate behavior. Don't play innocent, boy. I've been a chaperone before, you know. I kept your grandparents apart for eons."

Suddenly I remembered the story of Nut and Geb, the sky and earth. Ra had commanded Nut's father, Shu, to keep the two lovers apart so they would never have children who might someday usurp Ra's throne. That strategy hadn't worked, but apparently Shu was still trying.

The air god waved his hand in disgust at the unconscious mortals, some of whom were just starting to groan and stir. "And now, Anubis, I find you in this den of iniquity, this morass of questionable behavior, this…this—"

"School?" I suggested.

"Yes!" Shu nodded so vigorously, his head disintegrated into a cloud of leaves. "You heard the decree of the gods, boy. You've become *entirely* too close to this mortal. You are hereby banned from further contact!"

"What?" I shouted. "That's ridiculous! Who decreed this?"

Shu made a sound like a blown-out tire. Either he was laughing or giving me a windy raspberry. "The entire council, girl! Led by Lord Horus and Lady Isis!"

I felt as if I were dissolving into scraps of rubbish myself.

Isis and Horus? I couldn't believe it. Stabbed in the back by my two supposed friends. Isis and I were going to have words about this.

I turned to Anubis, hoping he'd tell me it was a lie.

He raised his hands miserably. "Sadie, I was trying to tell you. Gods are not allowed to become directly…um, *involved* with mortals. That's only possible when a god inhabits a human form, and… and as you know, I've never worked that way."

I gritted my teeth. I wanted to argue that Anubis had quite a *nice* form, but he'd told me often that he could only manifest in dreams, or in places of death. Unlike other gods, he'd never taken a human host.

It was so bloody *unfair*. We hadn't even dated properly. One kiss six months ago, and Anubis was grounded from seeing me forever?

"You can't be serious." I'm not sure who made me angrier—the fussy air god chaperone or Anubis himself. "You're not really going to let them rule you like this?"

"He has no choice!" Shu cried. The effort made him cough so badly, his chest exploded into dandelion fluff. He took another blast from his inhaler. "Brooklyn ozone levels—deplorable! Now, off with you, Anubis. No more contact with this mortal. It is *not* proper. And as for you, girl, stay away from him! You have more important things to do."

"Oh, yes?" I said. "And what about you, Mr. Trash Tornado? We're preparing for war, and the most important thing you can do is keep people from waltzing?"

The air pressure rose suddenly. Blood roared in my head.

"See here, girl," Shu growled. "I've already helped you more than you deserve. I heeded that Russian boy's prayer. I brought him here all the way from St. Petersburg to speak with you. So, shoo!"

The wind blasted me backward. The ghosts blew away like smoke. The unconscious mortals began to stir, shielding their faces from the debris.

"Russian boy?" I shouted over the gale. "What on earth are you talking about?"

Shu disbanded into rubbish and swirled around Anubis, lifting him off his feet.

"Sadie!" Anubis tried to fight his way toward me, but the storm was too strong. "Shu, at least let me tell her about Walt! She has a right to know!"

I could barely hear him above the wind. "Did you say, *Walt*?" I shouted. "What about him?"

Anubis said something I couldn't make out. Then the flurry of debris completely obscured him.

When the wind died, both gods were gone. I stood alone on the dance floor, surrounded by dozens of kids and adults who were starting to wake up.

I was about to run to Carter to make sure he was all right. [Yes, Carter, honestly I was.]

Then, at the edge of the pavilion, a young man stepped into the light.

He wore a gray military outfit with a wool coat too heavy for the warm September night. His enormous ears seemed to be the only things holding up his oversized hat. A rifle was slung across his shoulder. He couldn't have been more than seventeen; and though he was definitely not from any of the schools at the dance, he looked vaguely familiar.

St. Petersburg, Shu had said.

Yes. I'd met this boy briefly last spring. Carter and I had been running from the Hermitage Museum. This boy had tried to stop us. He'd been disguised as a guard, but revealed himself as a magician from the Russian Nome—one of the servants of the evil Vlad Menshikov.

I grabbed my staff from the Duat—successfully this time.

The boy raised his hands in surrender.

"Nyet!" he pleaded. Then, in halting English, he said: "Sadie Kane. We…need…to talk."

SADIE

6. Amos Plays with Action Figures

HIS NAME WAS LEONID, and we agreed not to kill each other.

We sat on the steps of the gazebo and talked while the students and teachers struggled to wake up around us.

Leonid's English was not good. My Russian was nonexistent, but I understood enough of his story to be alarmed. He'd escaped the Russian Nome and somehow convinced Shu to whisk him here to find me. Leonid remembered me from our invasion of the Hermitage. Apparently I'd made a strong impression on the young man. No surprise. I am rather memorable.

[Oh, stop laughing, Carter.]

Using words, hand gestures, and sound effects, Leonid tried to explain what had happened in St. Petersburg since the death of Vlad Menshikov. I couldn't follow it all, but this much I understood: *Kwai, Jacobi, Apophis, First Nome, many deaths, soon, very soon.*

Teachers began corralling students and calling parents. Apparently they feared the mass blackout might have been caused by bad punch or hazardous gas (Drew's perfume, perhaps) and they'd decided to evacuate the area. I suspected we'd have police and paramedics on the scene shortly. I wanted to be gone before then.

I dragged Leonid over to meet my brother, who was stumbling around, rubbing his eyes.

"What happened?" Carter asked. He scowled at Leonid. "Who—?"

I gave him the one-minute version: Anubis's visit, Shu's intervention, the Russian's appearance. "Leonid has information about an impending attack on the First Nome," I said. "The rebels will be after him."

Carter scratched his head. "You want to hide him at Brooklyn House?"

"No," I said. "I've got to take him to Amos straightaway."

Leonid choked. "Amos? He turn into Set—eat face?"

"Amos will *not* eat your face," I assured him. "Jacobi's been telling you stories."

Leonid still looked uneasy. "Amos not become Set?"

How to explain without making it sound worse? I didn't know the correct Russian for: *He was possessed by Set but it wasn't his fault, and he's much better now.*

"No Set," I said. "Good Amos."

Carter studied the Russian. He looked at me with concern. "Sadie, what if this is a trap? You *trust* this guy?"

"Oh, I can handle Leonid. He doesn't want me to morph him into a banana slug, do you, Leonid?"

"Nyet," Leonid said solemnly. "No banana slug."

"There, you see?"

"What about visiting Thoth?" Carter asked. "That can't wait."

I saw the worry in his eyes. I imagined he was thinking the same thing I was: our mum was in trouble. The spirits of the dead were disappearing, and it had something to do with the shadow of Apophis. We had to find the connection.

"You visit Thoth," I said. "Take Walt. And, uh, keep an eye on him, all right? Anubis wanted to tell me something about him, but there wasn't time. And in Dallas, when I looked at Walt in the Duat…"

I couldn't make myself finish. Just thinking about Walt wrapped in mummy linen brought tears to my eyes.

Fortunately, Carter seemed to get the general idea. "I'll keep him safe," he promised. "How will you get to Egypt?"

I pondered that. Leonid had apparently flown here via Shu Airways, but I doubted that fussy aviator god would be willing to help me, and I didn't want to ask.

"We'll risk a portal," I said. "I know they've been a bit wonky, but it's just one quick jump. What could go wrong?"

"You could materialize inside a wall," Carter said. "Or wind up scattered through the Duat in a million pieces."

"Why, Carter, you care! But really, we'll be fine. And we haven't got much choice."

I gave him a quick hug—I know, horribly sentimental, but I wanted to show solidarity. Then, before I could change my mind, I took Leonid's hand and raced across campus.

My head was still spinning from my talk with Anubis. How dare Isis and Horus keep us apart when we weren't even together! And what had Anubis wanted to tell me about Walt? Perhaps he'd wanted to end our ill-fated relationship and give his blessing for me to date Walt. (Lame.) Or perhaps he wanted to declare his undying love and fight Walt for my affections. (Highly unlikely, nor would I appreciate being fought over like a basketball.) Or perhaps—most probable—he'd wanted to break some bad news.

Anubis had visited Walt on several occasions that I knew of. They'd both been rather tight-lipped about what was discussed, but since Anubis was the guide of the dead, I assumed he'd been preparing Walt for death. Anubis might have wanted to warn me that the time was nigh—as if I needed another reminder.

Anubis: off-limits. Walt: at death's door. If I lost both of the guys I liked, well…there wasn't much point in saving the world.

All right, that was a *slight* exaggeration. But only slight.

On top of that, my mum was in trouble, and Sarah Jacobi's rebels were planning some horrible attack on my uncle's headquarters.

Why, then, did I feel so…*hopeful*?

An idea started to tug at me—a tiny glimmer of possibility. It wasn't just the prospect that we

might find a way to defeat the serpent. Anubis's words kept playing in my mind: *The shadow lingers. There must be a way to retrieve a soul from oblivion.*

If a shadow could be used to bring back a mortal soul that had been destroyed, could it do the same for a god?

I was so lost in thought, I barely noticed when we reached the fine arts building. Leonid stopped me.

"This for portal?" He pointed to a block of carved limestone in the courtyard.

"Yes," I said. "Thanks."

Long story short: when I started at BAG, I reckoned it would be good to have an Egyptian relic close by for emergencies. So I did the logical thing: I borrowed a chunk of limestone frieze from the nearby Brooklyn Museum. Honestly, the museum had enough rocks. I didn't think they'd miss this one.

I'd left a facsimile in its place and asked Alyssa to present the actual Egyptian frieze to her art teacher as her class project—an attempt to simulate an ancient art form. The teacher had been duly impressed. He'd installed "Alyssa's" artwork in the courtyard outside his classroom. The carving showed mourners at a funeral, which I thought appropriate for a school setting.

It wasn't a powerful or important piece of art, but all relics of Ancient Egypt have some amount of power, like magical batteries. With the right training, a magician can use them to jump-start spells that would otherwise be impossible, such as opening portals.

I'd got rather good at this particular magic. Leonid watched my back as I began to chant.

Most magicians wait for "auspicious moments" to open gates. They spend years memorizing a timetable of important anniversaries like the time of day each god was born, the alignment of the stars, and whatnot. I suppose I should have worried about such things, but I didn't. Given the thousands of years of Egyptian history, there were so *many* auspicious moments that I simply chanted until I hit one. Of course, I had to hope my portal didn't open during an *inauspicious* moment. That could have caused all sorts of nasty side effects—but what's life without taking a few risks?

(Carter is shaking his head and muttering. I have no idea why.)

The air rippled in front of us. A circular doorway appeared—a swirling vortex of golden sand—and Leonid and I jumped through.

I'd like to say my spell worked perfectly and we ended up in the First Nome. Sadly, I was a bit off the mark.

The portal spit us out roughly a hundred meters above Cairo. I found myself free-falling through the cool night air toward the city lights below.

I didn't panic. I could have cast any number of spells to get out of this situation. I could have even assumed the form of a kite (the bird of prey, not the kind with a string), although that wasn't my favorite way to travel. Before I could decide on a plan of action, Leonid grabbed my hand.

The direction of the wind changed. Suddenly we were gliding over the city in a controlled descent. We set down softly in the desert just outside the city limits near a cluster of ruins that I knew from experience hid an entrance to the First Nome.

I looked at Leonid in amazement. "You summoned the power of Shu!"

"Shu," he said grimly. "Yes. Necessary. I do…forbidden."

I smiled with delight. “You clever boy! You learned the path of the gods on your own? I knew there was a reason I didn’t turn you into a banana slug.”

Leonid’s eyes widened. “No banana slug! Please!”

“It was a compliment, silly,” I said. “Forbidden is good! Sadie likes forbidden! Now, come on. You need to meet my uncle.”

No doubt Carter would describe the underground city in excruciating detail, with exact measurements of each room, boring history on every statue and hieroglyph, and background notes on the construction of the magical headquarters of the House of Life.

I will spare you that pain.

It’s big. It’s full of magic. It’s underground.

There. Sorted.

At the bottom of the entry tunnel, we crossed a stone bridge over a chasm, where I was challenged by a *ba*. The glowing bird spirit (with the head of a famous Egyptian I probably should’ve known) asked me a question: *What color are the eyes of Anubis?*

Brown. *Duh.* I suppose he was trying to trick me with an easy question.

The *ba* let us pass into the city proper. I hadn’t visited in six months, and I was distressed to see how few magicians were about. The First Nome had never been crowded. Egyptian magic had withered over the centuries as fewer and fewer young initiates learned the arts. But now most shops in the central cavern were closed. At the market stalls, no one was haggling over the price of *ankh*s or scorpion venom. A bored-looking amulet salesman perked up as we approached, then slumped as we passed by.

Our footsteps echoed in the silent tunnels. We crossed one of the subterranean rivers, then wound our way through the library quarter and the Chamber of Birds.

(Carter says I should tell you why it’s called that. It’s a cave full of all sorts of birds. Again —*duh*. [Carter, why are you banging your head against the table?])

I brought my Russian friend down a long corridor, past a sealed tunnel that had once led up to the Great Sphinx of Giza, and finally to the bronze doors of the Hall of Ages. It was my uncle’s hall now, so I strolled right in.

Impressive place? Certainly. If you filled it with water, the hall would’ve been large enough for a pod of whales. Running down the middle, a long blue carpet glittered like the River Nile. Along either side marched rows of columns, and between them shimmered curtains of light displaying scenes from Egypt’s past—all sorts of horrible, wonderful, heart-wrenching events.

I tried to avoid looking at them. I knew from experience that those images could be dangerously absorbing. Once I’d made the mistake of touching the lights, and the experience had almost turned my brain into oatmeal.

The first section of light was gold—the Age of the Gods. Farther along, the Old Kingdom glowed silver, then the Middle Kingdom in coppery brown, and so on.

Several times as we walked, I had to pull Leonid back from scenes that caught his eye. Honestly, I wasn’t much better.

I got teary-eyed when I saw a vision of Bes entertaining the other gods by doing cartwheels in a

loincloth. (I cried because I missed seeing him so full of life, I mean, though the sight of Bes in a loincloth *is* enough to make anyone's eyes burn.)

We passed the bronze curtain of light for the New Kingdom. I stopped abruptly. In the shifting mirage, a thin man in priestly robes held a wand and a knife over a black bull. The man muttered as if blessing the animal. I couldn't tell much about the scene, but I recognized the man's face—a beaky nose, high forehead, thin lips that twisted in a wicked smile as he ran the knife along the poor animal's throat.

"That's him," I muttered.

I walked toward the curtain of light.

"Nyet." Leonid grabbed my arm. "You tell me the lights are bad, stay away."

"You—you're right," I said. "But that's Uncle Vinnie."

I was positive it was the same face that had appeared in the wall at the Dallas Museum, but how could that be? The scene I was looking at must have happened thousands of years ago.

"Not Vinnie," Leonid said. "Khaemwaset."

"Sorry?" I wasn't sure if I'd heard him correctly, or even in what language he'd spoken. "Is that a name?"

"He is…" Leonid slipped into Russian, then sighed in exasperation. "Too difficult to explain. Let us see Amos, who will not eat my face."

I forced myself to look away from the image. "Good idea. Let's keep going."

At the end of the hall, the curtains of red light for the Modern Age changed to dark purple. Supposedly this marked the beginning of a new age, though none of us knew exactly what sort of era it would be. If Apophis destroyed the world, I guessed it would be the Age of Extremely Short Lives.

I'd expected to see Amos sitting at the foot of the pharaoh's throne. That was the traditional place for the Chief Lector, symbolizing his role as the pharaoh's main advisor. Of course, the pharaohs rarely needed advising these days, as they'd all been dead for several thousand years.

The dais was empty.

That stumped me. I'd never considered where the Chief Lector hung out when he wasn't on display. Did he have a dressing room, possibly with his name and a little star on the door?

"There." Leonid pointed.

Once again, my clever Russian friend was right. On the back wall, behind the throne, a faint line of light shone along the floor—the bottom edge of a door.

"A creepy secret entrance," I said. "Well done, Leonid."

On the other side, we found a sort of war room. Amos and a young woman in camouflage clothes stood at opposite ends of a large table inlaid with a full-color world map. The table's surface was crowded with tiny figurines—painted ships, monsters, magicians, cars, and markers with hieroglyphs.

Amos and the camouflage girl were so engrossed in their work, moving figurines across the map, they didn't notice us at first.

Amos wore traditional linen robes. With his barrel-shaped figure, they made him look a bit like Friar Tuck, except with darker skin and cooler hair. His braided locks were decorated with gold beads. His round glasses flashed as he studied the map. Draped around his shoulders was the leopard-skin cape of the Chief Lector.

As for the young woman…oh, gods of Egypt. It was *Zia*.

I'd never seen her in modern clothes before. She wore camouflage cargo pants, hiking boots, and an olive-colored tank top that flattered her coppery skin. Her black hair was longer than I remembered. She looked so much more grown-up and gorgeous than she'd been six months ago, I was glad Carter hadn't come along. He would've had difficulty picking up his jaw from the floor.

[Yes, you would have, Carter. She looked quite stunning, in a Commando Girl sort of way.]

Amos moved one of the figurines across the map. "Here," he told Zia.

"All right," she said. "But that leaves Paris undefended."

I cleared my throat. "Are we interrupting?"

Amos turned and broke into a grin. "Sadie!"

He crushed me in a hug, then rubbed my head affectionately.

"Ow," I said.

He chuckled. "I'm sorry. It's just so good to see you." He glanced at Leonid. "And this is—"

Zia cursed. She wedged herself between Amos and Leonid. "He's one of the Russians! Why is *he* here?"

"Calm down," I told her. "He's a friend."

I explained about Leonid's appearance at the dance. Leonid tried to help, but he kept slipping into Russian.

"Wait," Amos said. "Let's make this easier."

He touched Leonid's forehead. *"Med-wah."*

In the air above us, the hieroglyph for *Speak* burned red:

"There," Amos said. "That should help."

Leonid's eyebrows shot up. "You speak Russian?"

Amos smiled. "Actually for the next few minutes, we'll all be speaking Ancient Egyptian, but it will sound to each of us like our native tongue."

"Brilliant," I said. "Leonid, you'd best make the most of your time."

Leonid took off his army cap and fidgeted with the brim. "Sarah Jacobi and her lieutenant, Kwai…they mean to attack you."

"We know that," Amos said dryly.

"No, you don't understand!" Leonid's voice trembled with fear. "They are evil! They are working with Apophis!"

Perhaps it was a coincidence, but when he said that name, several figurines on the world map sparked and melted. My heart felt much the same way.

"Hold on," I said. "Leonid, how do you know this?"

His ears turned pink. "After the death of Menshikov, Jacobi and Kwai came to our nome. We

gave them refuge. Soon Jacobi took over, but my comrades did not object. They, ah, hate the Kanes very much." He looked at me guiltily. "After you broke into our headquarters last spring…well, the other Russians blame you for Menshikov's death and the rise of Apophis. They blame you for everything."

"Quite used to that," I said. "You didn't feel the same?"

He pinched his oversized cap. "I saw your power. You defeated the *tjesu-heru* monster. You could have destroyed me, but you didn't. You did not seem evil."

"Thanks for that."

"After we met, I became curious. I began reading old scrolls, learning to channel the power of the god Shu. I have always been a good air elementalist."

Amos grunted. "That took courage, Leonid. Exploring the path of the gods on your own in the middle of the Russian nome? You were brave."

"I was foolhardy." Leonid's forehead was damp with sweat. "Jacobi has killed magicians for lesser crimes. One of my friends, an old man named Mikhail, he once made the mistake of saying all Kanes might not be bad. Jacobi arrested him for treason. She gave him to Kwai, who does magic with —with lightning…terrible things. I heard Mikhail screaming in the dungeon for three nights before he died."

Amos and Zia exchanged grave looks. I had a feeling this wasn't the first time they'd heard about Kwai's torture methods.

"I'm so sorry," Amos said. "But how can you be sure Jacobi and Kwai are working for Apophis?"

The young Russian glanced at me for reassurance.

"You can trust Amos," I promised. "He'll protect you."

Leonid chewed his lip. "Yesterday I was in one of the chambers deep under the Hermitage, a place I thought was secret. I was studying a scroll to summon Shu—very forbidden magic. I heard Jacobi and Kwai approaching, so I hid. I overheard the two of them speaking, but their voices were… splintered. I don't know how to explain."

"They were possessed?" Zia asked.

"Worse," Leonid said. "They were each channeling dozens of voices. It was like a war council. I heard many monsters and demons. And presiding over the meeting was one voice, deeper and more powerful than the rest. I'd never heard anything like it, as if darkness could speak."

"Apophis," Amos said.

Leonid had gone very pale. "Please understand, most magicians in St. Petersburg, they are not evil. They are only scared and desperate to survive. Jacobi has convinced them she will save them. She has misled them with lies. She says the Kanes are demons. But she and Kwai…*they* are the monsters. They are no longer human. They have set up a camp at Abu Simbel. From there, they will lead the rebels against the First Nome."

Amos turned to his map. He traced his finger south along the River Nile to a small lake. "I sense nothing at Abu Simbel. If they are there, they've managed to hide themselves completely from my magic."

"They are there," Leonid promised.

Zia scowled. “Under our very noses, within easy striking distance. We should’ve killed the rebels at Brooklyn House when we had the chance.”

Amos shook his head. “We are servants of Ma’at—order and justice. We don’t kill our enemies for things they might do in the future.”

“And now our enemies will kill us,” Zia said.

On the table map, two more figurines sparked and melted in Spain. A miniature ship broke into pieces off the coast of Japan.

Amos grimaced. “More losses.”

He chose a cobra figurine from Korea and pushed it toward the shipwreck. He swept away the melted magicians from Spain.

“What *is* that map?” I asked.

Zia moved a hieroglyph token from Germany to France. “Iskandar’s war map. As I once told you, he was an expert at statuary magic.”

I remembered. The old Chief Lector had been so good, he’d made a replica of Zia herself…but I decided not to bring that up.

“Those tokens stand for actual forces,” I guessed.

“Yes,” Amos said. “The map shows us our enemy’s movements, at least most of them. It also allows us to send our forces by magic to where they are needed.”

“And, uh, how are we doing?”

His expression told me all I needed to know.

“We are spread too thin,” Amos said. “Jacobi’s followers strike wherever we are weakest. Apophis sends his demons to terrorize our allies. The attacks seem coordinated.”

“Because they are,” Leonid said. “Kwai and Jacobi are under the serpent’s control.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “How could Kwai and Jacobi be so stupid? Don’t they understand Apophis is going to destroy the world?”

“Chaos is seductive,” Amos said. “No doubt Apophis has made them promises of power. He whispers in their ears, convincing them they are too important to be destroyed. They believe they can make a new world better than the old, and the change is worth any price—even mass annihilation.”

I couldn’t grasp how anyone could be so deluded, but Amos spoke as if he understood. Of course, Amos had been through this. He’d been possessed by Set, god of evil and Chaos. Compared to Apophis, Set was a minor nuisance, but he’d still been able to turn my uncle—one of the most powerful magicians in the world—into a helpless puppet. If Carter and I hadn’t defeated Set and forced him to return to the Duat…well, the consequences wouldn’t have been pretty.

Zia picked up a falcon figurine. She moved it toward Abu Simbel, but the little statue began to steam. She was forced to drop it.

“They’ve put up powerful wards,” she said. “We won’t be able to eavesdrop.”

“They will attack in three days,” Leonid said. “At the same time, Apophis will rise—at dawn on the autumn equinox.”

“*Another* equinox?” I grumbled. “Didn’t that *last* bit of nastiness happen on one of those? You Egyptians have an unhealthy obsession with equinoxes.”

Amos gave me a stern look. "Sadie, as I'm sure you're aware, the equinox is a time of great magic significance, when day and night are equal. Besides, the autumn equinox marks the last day before darkness overtakes the light. It is the anniversary of Ra's retreat into the heavens. I feared that Apophis might make his move at that time. It's a most inauspicious day."

"Inauspicious?" I frowned. "But inauspicious is bad. Why would they…oh."

I realized for the forces of Chaos, our bad days must've been their good days. That meant they probably had a lot of good days.

Amos leaned on his staff. His hair seemed to be turning gray before my eyes. I remembered Michel Desjardins, the last Chief Lector, and how quickly he had aged. I couldn't bear the idea of that happening to Amos.

"We don't have the strength to defeat our enemies," he said. "I will have to use other means."

"Amos, no," Zia said. "Please."

I wasn't sure what they were talking about. Zia sounded horrified, and anything that scared her, I didn't want to know about.

"Actually," I said, "Carter and I have a plan."

I told them about our idea of using Apophis's own shadow against him. Perhaps saying this in front of Leonid was reckless, but he had risked his life to warn us about Sarah Jacobi's plans. He had trusted me. The least I could do was return the favor.

When I finished explaining, Amos gazed at his map. "I've never heard of such magic. Even if it's possible—"

"It *is*," I insisted. "Why else would Apophis delay his Doomsday attack so he could track down and destroy every scroll by this fellow Setne? Apophis is afraid we'll figure out the spell and stop him."

Zia crossed her arms. "But you can't. You just said all copies were destroyed."

"We'll ask Thoth for help," I said. "Carter's on his way there now. And in the meantime…I have an errand to run. I may be able to test our theory about shadows."

"How?" Amos asked.

I told him what I had in mind.

He looked as if he wanted to object, but he must've seen the defiance in my eyes. We're related, after all. He knows how stubborn Kanes can be when they set their minds to something.

"Very well," he said. "First you must eat and rest. You can leave at dawn. Zia, I want you to go with her."

Zia looked startled. "Me? But I might…I mean, is it wise?"

Again I got the feeling I'd missed an important conversation. What had Amos and Zia been discussing?

"You'll be fine," Amos assured her. "Sadie will need your help. And I will arrange for someone else to watch Ra during the day."

She looked quite nervous, which wasn't like her. Zia and I had had our differences in the past, but she'd never been short of confidence. Now I almost felt worried for her.

"Cheer up," I told her. "It'll be a laugh. Quick trip to the Netherworld, fiery lake of doom. What

could go wrong?”

CARTER

7. I Get Strangled by an Old Friend

SO, YEAH.

Sadie goes off on a side adventure with some guy, leaving me to do the boring work of figuring out how to save the world. Why does this sound familiar? Oh, right. That's the way Sadie always is. If it's time to move forward, you can count on her to veer sideways on some ADHD tangent of her own.

[Why are you thanking me, Sadie? That wasn't a compliment.]

After the Brooklyn Academy dance, I was pretty miffed. Bad enough being forced to slow-dance with Sadie's friend Lacy. But passing out on the dance floor, waking up with Lacy snoring in my armpit, and then finding out I'd missed visits from two gods—that was just embarrassing.

After Sadie and the Russian guy left, I got our crew back to Brooklyn House. Walt was confused to see us so soon. I pulled him and Bast aside for a quick conference on the terrace. I explained what Sadie had told me about Shu, Anubis, and the Russian dude Leonid.

"I'll take Freak to Memphis," I said. "Be back as soon as I talk to Thoth."

"I'm going with you," Walt said.

Sadie had told me to take him along, of course, but looking at him now, I had second thoughts. Walt's cheeks were sunken. His eyes were glassy. I was alarmed by how much worse he looked since just yesterday. I know this is horrible, but I couldn't help thinking about Egyptian burial practices—how they'd pack a body with embalming salts to slowly dry it up from the inside. Walt looked like he'd been started on that process.

"Look, man," I said, "Sadie asked me to keep you safe. She's worried about you. So am I."

He clenched his jaw. "If you plan on using a shadow for your spell, you'll have to capture it with that figurine. You'll need a *sau*, and I'm the best you've got."

Unfortunately, Walt was right. Neither Sadie nor I had the skill to capture a shadow, if that was even possible. Only Walt had that kind of charm-making talent.

"All right," I muttered. "Just…keep your head down. I don't want my sister going nuclear on me."

Bast poked Walt's arm, the way a cat might nudge a bug to see if it was still alive. She sniffed his hair.

"Your aura is weak," Bast said, "but you should be all right to travel. Try not to exert yourself. No magic unless absolutely necessary."

Walt rolled his eyes. "Yes, Mother."

Bast seemed to like that.

"I'll watch the other kittens," she promised. "Er, I mean initiates. You two be careful. I don't have much love for Thoth, but I don't want you caught up in his problems."

"What problems?" I asked.

"You'll see. Just come back to me. All this guard duty is cutting into my nap schedule!"

She shooed us toward Freak's stable and headed back downstairs, muttering something about catnip.

We hitched up the boat. Freak squawked and buzzed his wings, anxious to go. He looked like he'd gotten a good rest. Besides, he knew that a journey meant more frozen turkeys for him.

Soon we were flying over the East River.

Our ride through the Duat seemed bumpier than usual, like airplane turbulence, except with ghostly wailing and heavy fog. I was glad I'd had a light dinner. My stomach churned.

The boat shuddered as Freak brought us out of the Duat. Below us spread a different nighttime landscape—the lights of Memphis, Tennessee, curving along the banks of the Mississippi River.

On the shoreline rose a glassy black pyramid—an abandoned sports arena that Thoth had appropriated for his home. Bursts of multicolored light peppered the air, reflections rippling across the pyramid. At first I thought Thoth was hosting a fireworks exhibition. Then I realized his pyramid was under attack.

Clambering up the sides was a gruesome assortment of demons—humanoid figures with chicken feet or paws or insect legs. Some had fur. Some had scales or shells like tortoises. Instead of heads, many had weapons or tools sprouting from their necks—hammers, swords, axes, chain saws, even a few screwdrivers.

At least a hundred demons were climbing toward the top, digging their claws into the seams of the glass. Some tried to smash their way through, but wherever they struck, the pyramid flickered with blue light, repelling their attacks. Winged demons swirled through the air, screeching and diving at a small group of defenders.

Thoth stood at the peak. He looked like a scruffy college lab assistant in a white medical coat, jeans, and T-shirt, a day-old beard, and wild Einstein hair—which doesn't sound very intimidating, but you should see him in combat. He threw glowing hieroglyphs like grenades, causing iridescent explosions all around him. Meanwhile his assistants, a troop of baboons and long-beaked birds called ibises, engaged the enemy. The baboons slammed basketballs into the demons, sending them toppling back down the pyramid. The ibises ran between the monsters' legs, jabbing their beaks in the most sensitive places they could find.

As we flew closer, I lowered my vision into the Duat. The scene there was even scarier. The demons were connected by red coils of energy that formed one massive translucent serpent. The monster encircled the entire pyramid. At the top, Thoth shone in his ancient form—a giant, white-kilted man with the head of an ibis, hurling bolts of energy at his enemies.

Walt whistled. "How can the mortals not notice a battle like that?"

I wasn't sure, but I remembered some of the recent disaster news. Huge storms had been causing floods all along the Mississippi River, including here in Memphis. Hundreds of people had been displaced. Magicians might be able to see what was really happening, but any regular mortals still in

the city probably thought this was just a major thunderstorm.

"I'll help Thoth," I said. "You stay in the boat."

"No," Walt said. "Bast said I should use magic only in an emergency. This qualifies."

I knew Sadie would kill me if I let Walt get hurt. On the other hand, Walt's tone told me he wasn't going to back down. He can be almost as stubborn as my sister when he wants to be.

"Fine," I said. "Hold on."

A year ago, if I'd faced a fight like this, I would have curled into a ball and tried to hide. Even our battle at the Red Pyramid last Christmas seemed minor compared to dive-bombing an army of demons with no backup except one sick guy and a slightly dysfunctional griffin.

But a lot had happened in the past year. Now this was just another bad day in the life of the Kane family.

Freak came screaming down out of the night sky and banked hard to the right, shooting across the side of the pyramid. He gulped down smaller demons and shredded the larger ones with his buzz-saw wings. Some that survived got run over by our boat.

As Freak began to climb again, Walt and I jumped out, scrambling for footing on the glassy slope. Walt threw an amulet. In a flash of light, a golden sphinx appeared, with a lion's body and the head of a woman. After our experience at the Dallas Museum, I didn't much care for sphinxes, but thankfully this one was on our side.

Walt jumped on its back and rode into battle. The sphinx snarled and pounced on a reptilian demon, tearing it to pieces. Other monsters scattered. I couldn't blame them. A massive gold lion would have been scary enough, but the growling woman's head made it even more horrifying, with merciless emerald eyes, a shining Egyptian crown, and a fanged mouth with way too much lipstick.

As for me, I summoned my *khopesh* from the Duat. I called on the power of Horus, and the glowing blue avatar of the war god formed around me. Soon I was encased in a twenty-foot-tall hawk-headed apparition.

I stepped forward. The avatar mirrored my movements. I swiped my sword at the nearest demons, and the avatar's massive glowing blade plowed them down like bowling pins. Two of the monsters actually had bowling pins for heads, so I guess that was appropriate.

The baboons and ibises were slowly making headway against the surge of demons. Freak flew around the pyramid, snapping up winged demons or smacking them out of the air with his boat.

Thoth kept flinging hieroglyphic grenades.

"Bloated!" he cried. The corresponding hieroglyph flew through the air, bursting against a demon's chest in a spray of light. Instantly, the demon swelled like a water balloon and rolled screaming down the pyramid.

"Flat!" Thoth blasted another demon, who collapsed and shriveled into a monster-shaped doormat.

"Intestinal problems!" Thoth yelled. The poor demon who got zapped with that one turned green and doubled over.

I waded through monsters, tossing them aside and slicing them to dust. Everything was going great until a winged demon did a kamikaze dive into my chest. I toppled backward, slamming against the pyramid with such force that I lost my concentration. My magical armor dissolved. I would've

skidded all the way down the pyramid if the demon hadn't grabbed my throat and held me in place.

"Carter Kane," he hissed. "You are stupidly persistent."

I recognized that face—like an anatomy-class cadaver with muscle and sinew but no skin. His lidless eyes glowed red. His fangs were bared in a murderous grin.

"You," I grunted.

"Yes," the demon chuckled, his claws tightening around my neck. "Me."

Face of Horror—Set's lieutenant from the Red Pyramid, and the secret mouthpiece of Apophis. We'd killed him in the shadow of the Washington Monument, but I guess that didn't mean anything. Now he was back, and, judging by his rasping voice and glowing red eyes, he was still possessed by my least favorite snake.

I didn't remember his being able to fly, but now leathery bat wings sprouted from his shoulders. He straddled me with his chicken legs, his hands digging into my windpipe. His breath smelled like fermented juice and skunk spray.

"I could have killed you many times," the demon said. "But you interest me, Carter."

I tried to fight him off. My arms had turned to lead. I could barely hold my sword.

Around us, the sounds of battle became muted. Freak flew overhead, but his wings beat so sluggishly, I could actually see them. A hieroglyph exploded in slow motion like dye in water. Apophis was dragging me deeper into the Duat.

"I can feel your turmoil," said the demon. "Why do you fight this hopeless battle? Don't you realize what will happen?"

Images raced through my mind.

I saw a landscape of shifting hills and fiery geysers. Winged demons turned in the sulfurous sky. Spirits of the dead skittered across the hills, wailing in desperation and clawing for handholds. They were all being pulled in the same direction—toward a blot of darkness on the horizon. Whatever it was, its gravity was as powerful as a black hole. It sucked in the spirits, bending the hills and plumes of fire toward it. Even the demons in the air struggled.

Huddled in the shelter of a cliff, the glowing white form of a woman tried to anchor herself against the dark current. I wanted to cry. The woman was my mother. Other ghosts flew past her, wailing helplessly. My mom tried to reach out, but she couldn't save them.

The scene shifted. I saw the Egyptian desert at the edge of Cairo under a blazing sun. Suddenly the sands erupted. A giant red serpent rose from the Underworld. He lunged at the sky and somehow, impossibly, swallowed the sun in a single gulp. The world darkened. Frost spread across the dunes. Cracks appeared in the ground. The landscape crumbled. Whole neighborhoods of Cairo sank into chasms. A red ocean of Chaos swelled up from the Nile, dissolving the city and desert, washing away pyramids that had stood for millennia. Soon there was nothing left but a boiling sea under a starless black sky.

"No gods can save you, Carter." Apophis sounded almost sympathetic. "This fate has been decreed since the beginning of time. Yield to me, and I will spare you and those you love. You will ride the Sea of Chaos. You will be master of your own destiny."

I saw an island floating across the boiling ocean—a small patch of green earth like an oasis. My family and I could be together on that island. We could survive. We could have anything we wanted

just by imagining it. Death would mean nothing.

"All I ask is a token of goodwill," Apophis urged. "Give me Ra. I know you hate him. He represents everything that is wrong with your mortal world. He has grown senile, rotten, weak, and useless. Surrender him to me. I will spare you. Think on this, Carter Kane. Have the gods promised you anything as fair?"

The visions faded. Face of Horror grinned down at me, but suddenly his features contorted in pain. A fiery hieroglyph burned across his forehead—the symbol for *desiccate*—and the demon crumbled to dust.

I gasped for breath. My throat felt like it was packed with hot coals.

Thoth stood over me, looking grim and tired. His eyes swirled with kaleidoscopic colors, like portals to another world.

"Carter Kane." He offered me a hand and helped me up.

All the other demons were gone. Walt stood at the peak of the pyramid with the baboons and ibises, who were climbing over the golden sphinx lady like she was a merry-go-round animal. Freak hovered nearby, looking full and happy from eating so many demons.

"You shouldn't have come," Thoth chided. He brushed demon dust off his T-shirt, which had a flaming heart logo and the words HOUSE OF BLUES. "It was much too dangerous, especially for Walt."

"You're welcome," I croaked. "It looked like you needed help."

"The demons?" Thoth waved dismissively. "They'll be back just before sunrise. They've been attacking every six hours for the past week. Quite annoying."

"Every six hours?" I tried to imagine that. If Thoth had been fighting off an army like that several times a day for a week…I didn't see how even a god could have that much power.

"Where are the other gods?" I asked. "Shouldn't they be helping you?"

Thoth wrinkled his nose as if he smelled a demon with intestinal problems. "Perhaps you and Walt should come inside. Now that you're here, we have a lot to talk about."

I'll say this for Thoth. He knew how to decorate a pyramid.

The former arena's basketball court was still there, no doubt so his baboons could play. (Baboons love basketball.) The JumboTron still hung from the ceiling, flashing a series of hieroglyphs that announced things like: GO TEAM! DEFENSE! and THOTH 25—DEMONS 0 in Ancient Egyptian.

The stadium seating had been replaced with a series of tiered balconies. Some were lined with computer stations, like mission control for a rocket launch. Others had chemistry tables cluttered with beakers, Bunsen burners, vials of smoking goo, jars of pickled organs, and stranger things. The nosebleed section was devoted to scroll cubbies—a library easily as big as the one in the First Nome. And behind the left backboard rose a three-story-tall whiteboard covered in computations and hieroglyphs.

Hanging from the girders, instead of championship banners and retired numbers, were black tapestries embroidered with gold incantations.

Courtside was Thoth's living area—a freestanding gourmet kitchen, a plush collection of couches and easy chairs, piles of books, buckets of Legos and Tinker Toys, a dozen flat-screen TVs

showing different news programs and documentaries, and a small forest of electric guitars and amplifiers—everything a scatterbrained god needed to be able to do twenty things at once.

Thoth's baboons took Freak into the locker room to groom him and let him rest. I think they were worried he might eat the ibises, since they did look a bit like turkeys.

Thoth turned to Walt and me, looking us over critically. "You need rest. Then I'll fix you some dinner."

"We don't have time," I said. "We have to—"

"Carter Kane," Thoth scolded. "You've just battled Apophis, gotten the Horus knocked out of you, been dragged through the Duat and half-strangled. You're no good to anyone until you get some sleep."

I wanted to protest, but Thoth pressed his hand to my forehead. Weariness washed over me.

"Rest," Thoth insisted.

I collapsed on the nearest couch.

I'm not sure how long I slept, but Walt got up first. When I woke, he and Thoth were deep in conversation.

"No," Thoth said. "It's never been done. And I'm afraid you don't have time…." He faltered when he noticed me sitting up. "Ah. Good, Carter. You're awake."

"What did I miss?"

"Nothing," he said, a little too cheerily. "Come and eat."

His kitchen counter was laden with fresh-cut brisket, sausage, ribs, and cornbread, plus an industrial-sized dispenser of iced tea. Thoth had once told me that barbecue was a form of magic, and I guess he was right. The smell of food made me temporarily forget my troubles.

I scarfed down a brisket sandwich and drank two glasses of tea. Walt nibbled on a rib, but he didn't seem to have much of an appetite.

Meanwhile Thoth picked up a Gibson guitar. He struck a power chord that shook the arena floor. He'd gotten better since I'd last heard him. The chord actually sounded like a chord, not like a mountain goat being tortured.

I gestured around with a piece of cornbread. "This place is looking good."

Thoth chuckled. "Better than my last headquarters, eh?"

The first time Sadie and I had crossed paths with the god of knowledge, he'd been holed up at a local university campus. He had tested our worth by sending us on a quest to trash Elvis Presley's house (long story), but hopefully we were past the testing phase now. I preferred hanging out courtside eating barbecue.

Then I thought about the visions Face of Horror had shown me—my mother in danger, a darkness swallowing the souls of the dead, the world dissolving in a sea of Chaos—except for one small island floating across the waves. The memory kind of killed my appetite.

"So…" I pushed my plate away. "Tell me about the demon attacks. And what were you saying to Walt?"

Walt stared at his half-eaten pork rib.

Thoth strummed a minor chord. "Where to start…? The attacks began seven days ago. I'm cut off

from the other gods. They haven't come to my rescue, I imagine, because they're having similar problems. Divide and conquer—Apophis understands that basic military principle. Even if my brethren *could* help me…well, they have other priorities. Ra was recently brought back, as you may recall."

Thoth gave me a hard look, like I was an equation he couldn't balance. "The sun god must be guarded on his nightly journey. That takes a lot of godpower."

My shoulders sagged. I didn't need one more thing to feel guilty about. I also didn't think it was fair of Thoth to act so critical of me. Thoth had been on our side, more or less, about bringing back the sun god. Maybe seven days of demon attacks had started to change his mind.

"Can't you just leave?" I asked.

Thoth shook his head. "Perhaps you can't see so deeply into the Duat, but the power of Apophis has completely encircled this pyramid. I am quite stuck."

I gazed up at the arena's ceiling, which suddenly seemed much lower. "Which means…we're stuck too?"

Thoth waved aside the question. "*You* should be able to pass back through. The serpent's net is designed to catch a god. You and Walt aren't large or important enough to be caught."

I wondered if that were true, or if Apophis was allowing me to come and go—to have the choice of surrendering Ra.

You interest me, Carter, Apophis had said. *Yield to me, and I will spare you.*

I took a deep breath. "But, Thoth, if you're on your own…I mean, how much longer can you last?"

The god brushed at his lab coat, which was covered with scribbles in a dozen languages. The word *time* fluttered off his sleeve. Thoth caught it, and suddenly he was checking a gold pocket watch.

"Let's see. Judging from the weakening of the pyramid's defenses and the rate at which my power is being expended, I'd say I could withstand nine more attacks, or just over two days, which would take us to dawn on the equinox. Ha! That can't be a coincidence."

"And then?" Walt asked.

"Then my pyramid will be breached. My minions will be killed. I'm guessing Doomsday will happen all over, in fact. The fall equinox would be a sensible time for Apophis to rise. He'll probably cast me into the abyss, or possibly scatter my essence across the universe in a billion pieces. Hmm…the physics of a god's death." His pocket watch turned into a pen. He scribbled something on the neck of his guitar. "That would make an excellent research paper."

"Thoth," Walt prompted. "Tell Carter what you told me, about why you're being targeted."

"I thought that was obvious," Thoth said. "Apophis wants to distract me from helping you. That *is* why you've come, isn't it? To find out about the serpent's shadow?"

For a moment I was too stunned to speak. "How did you know?"

"Please." Thoth played a Jimi Hendrix riff, then set down his guitar. "I *am* the god of knowledge. I knew sooner or later you'd come to the conclusion that your only hope of victory was a shadow execration."

"A shadow execration," I repeated. "That's an actual spell with an actual name? It could work?"

"In theory."

"And you didn't volunteer this information—*why?*"

Thoth snorted. "Knowledge of any value can't be given. It must be sought and earned. You're a teacher now, Carter. You should know this."

I wasn't sure whether to strangle him or hug him. "So, I'm seeking the knowledge. I'm earning the knowledge. How do I defeat Apophis?"

"I'm so glad you asked!" Thoth beamed at me with his multicolored eyes. "Unfortunately, I can't tell you."

I glanced at Walt. "Do you want to kill him, or should I?"

"Now, now," Thoth said. "I can guide you a little. But you'll have to connect the freckles, as they say."

"Dots," I said.

"Yes," he said. "You're on the right track. The *sheut* could be used to destroy a god, or even Apophis himself. And yes, like all sentient beings, Apophis has a shadow, though he keeps that part of his soul well hidden and well guarded."

"So where is it?" I asked. "How do we use it?"

Thoth spread his hands. "The second question I can't answer. The first question I'm not allowed to answer."

Walt shoved his plate aside. "I've been trying to get it out of him, Carter. For a god of knowledge, he isn't very helpful."

"Come on, Thoth," I said. "Can't we do a quest for you or something? Couldn't we blow up Elvis's house again?"

"Tempting," the god said. "But you must understand, giving a mortal the location of an immortal's shadow—even Apophis's—would be a grave crime. The other gods already think I'm a sell-out. Over the centuries, I've divulged too many secrets to mankind. I taught you the art of writing. I taught you magic and founded the House of Life."

"Which is why magicians still honor you," I said. "So help us one more time."

"And give humans knowledge that could be used to destroy the gods?" Thoth sighed. "Can you understand why my brethren might object to such a thing?"

I clenched my fists. I thought about my mother's spirit huddling beneath a cliff, fighting to stay put. The dark force *had* to be Apophis's shadow. Apophis had shown me that vision to make me despair. As his power grew, his shadow grew stronger too. It was pulling in the spirits of the dead, consuming them.

I could guess the shadow was somewhere in the Duat, but that didn't help. It was like saying *somewhere in the Pacific Ocean*. The Duat was huge.

I glared at Thoth. "Your other option is not to help us and let Apophis destroy the world."

"Point taken," he admitted, "which is why I'm still talking to you. There *is* a way you could find the shadow's location. Long ago, when I was young and naïve, I wrote a book—a field study, of sorts—called the Book of Thoth."

"Catchy name," Walt muttered.

"*I* thought so!" Thoth said. "At any rate, it described every form and disguise each god can take, their most secret hiding places—all sorts of embarrassing details."

"Including how to find their shadows?" I asked.

"No comment. At any rate, I never meant for humans to read the book, but it was stolen in ancient times by a crafty magician."

"Where is it now?" I asked. Then I held up my hands. "Wait…let me guess. You can't tell us."

"Honestly, I don't know," Thoth said. "This crafty magician hid the book. Fortunately he died before he could take full advantage of it, but he *did* use its knowledge to formulate a number of spells, including the shadow execration. He wrote down his thoughts in a special variation of the Book of Overcoming Apophis."

"Setne," I said. "That's the magician you're talking about."

"Indeed. His spell was only theoretical, of course. Even *I* never had that knowledge. And as you know, all copies of his scroll have now been destroyed."

"So it's hopeless," I said. "Dead end."

"Oh, no," Thoth said. "You could ask Setne himself. He wrote the spell. He hid the Book of Thoth that, ahem, may or may not describe the shadow's location. If he were so inclined, he could help you."

"But hasn't Setne been dead for thousands of years?"

Thoth grinned. "Yes. And that's only the first problem."

Thoth told us about Setne, who'd apparently been pretty famous in Ancient Egypt—like Robin Hood, Merlin, and Attila the Hun rolled into one. The more I heard, the less I wanted to meet him.

"He was a pathological liar," Thoth said. "A scoundrel, a traitor, a thief, and a brilliant magician. He prided himself on stealing books of knowledge, including mine. He battled monsters, adventured in the Duat, conquered gods, and broke into sacred tombs. He created curses that couldn't be lifted and unearthed secrets that should have stayed buried. He was quite the evil genius."

Walt tugged at his amulets. "Sounds like you admire him."

The god gave him a sidelong grin. "Well, I appreciate the pursuit of knowledge, but I couldn't endorse Setne's methods. He'd stop at nothing to possess the secrets of the universe. He wanted to be a god, you see—not the *eye* of a god. A full-fledged immortal."

"Which is impossible," I guessed.

"Hard, not impossible," Thoth said. "Imhotep, the first mortal magician—he was made a god after his death." Thoth turned toward his computers. "That reminds me, I haven't seen Imhotep in millennia. I wonder what he's up to. Perhaps I should Google him—"

"Thoth," Walt said, "concentrate."

"Right. So, Setne. He created this spell for destroying any being—even a god. I could never endorse such knowledge falling into the hands of a mortal, but hypothetically speaking, if you needed the spell to defeat Apophis, you might be able to convince *Setne* to teach you the enchantment and lead you to the shadow of Apophis."

"Except Setne's dead," I said. "We keep coming back to that."

Walt sat up. "Unless…you're suggesting we find his spirit in the Underworld. But if Setne was

so evil, wouldn't Osiris have condemned him in the Hall of Judgment? Ammit would've eaten his heart, and he would have ceased to exist."

"Normally, yes," Thoth said. "But Setne is a special case. He's quite…persuasive. Even before the court of the Underworld, he was able to, ah, manipulate the legal system. Many times, Osiris sentenced him to oblivion, but Setne always managed to evade punishment. He got a lighter sentence, or he made a plea bargain, or he simply escaped. He's managed to survive—as a spirit, at least—all these eons."

Thoth turned his swirling eyes toward me. "But recently, Carter Kane, your father became Osiris. He's been cracking down on rebellious ghosts, trying to restore Ma'at to the Underworld. The next time the sun sets, approximately fourteen hours from now, Setne is scheduled for a new trial. He will come before your father. And this time—"

"My dad won't let him go." I felt like the demon's hands were closing around my throat again.

My father was fair but stern. He didn't take excuses from anyone. All the years we'd traveled together, I could never even get away with leaving my shirt untucked. If Setne was as bad as Thoth said, my father would show him no mercy. He'd toss this guy's heart to Ammit the Devourer like it was a doggie biscuit.

Walt's eyes shone with excitement. He looked more animated than I'd seen him in a long time. "We can plead with your dad," he said. "We can get Setne's trial delayed, or ask for a reduced sentence in exchange for Setne's help. The laws of the Underworld allow that."

I frowned. "How do you know so much about dead people's court?"

I regretted saying that immediately. I realized that he'd probably been preparing himself to face that courtroom. Maybe that's what he'd been discussing with Thoth earlier.

I'm afraid you don't have much time, Thoth had said.

"Sorry, man," I said.

"It's okay," Walt said. "But we have to try. If we can convince your dad to spare Setne—"

Thoth laughed. "That would be amusing, wouldn't it? If Setne got off yet again, because his evil ways were the only thing that might save the world?"

"Hilarious," I said. The brisket sandwich wasn't sitting well in my stomach. "So you're suggesting we go to my father's court and try to save the ghost of an evil psychotic magician. Then we ask this ghost to lead us to Apophis's shadow and teach us how to destroy it, while trusting that he won't escape, kill us, or betray us to the enemy."

Thoth nodded enthusiastically. "You'd have to be crazy! I certainly hope you are."

I took a deep breath. "I guess I'm crazy."

"Excellent!" Thoth cheered. "One more thing, Carter. To make this work, you'll need Walt's help, but he's running out of time. His only chance—"

"It's fine," Walt snapped. "I'll tell him myself."

Before I could ask what he meant, the overtime buzzer blared from the arena's speakers.

"It's almost dawn," Thoth said. "You two had better leave, before the demons return. Good luck. And by all means, give Setne my regards—if you live that long, of course."

CARTER

8. My Sister, the Flowerpot

THE RIDE BACK WASN'T FUN.

Walt and I held on to the boat while our teeth chattered and our eyes jiggled. The magic fog had turned the color of blood. Ghostly voices whispered angrily, like they'd decided to riot and loot the ethereal world.

Sooner than I expected, Freak pushed his way out of the Duat. We found ourselves over the New Jersey dockyards, our boat trailing steam as Freak bobbed wearily through the air. In the distance, the Manhattan skyline gleamed gold in the sunrise.

Walt and I hadn't spoken during the trip. The Duat tends to put a damper on conversation. Now he regarded me sheepishly.

"I should explain some things," he said.

I can't pretend I wasn't curious. As his sickness had progressed, Walt had gotten more and more secretive. I wondered what he'd been talking about with Thoth.

But it wasn't my business. After Sadie learned my secret name last spring and got a free tour of my innermost thoughts, I'd become sensitive about respecting people's privacy.

"Look, Walt, it's your personal life," I said. "If you don't want to tell—"

"But it's not just personal. You need to know what's going on. I—I won't be around much longer."

I gazed down at the harbor, the Statue of Liberty passing below us. For months I'd known Walt was dying. It never got easier to accept. I remembered what Apophis had said at the Dallas Museum: Walt wouldn't live long enough to see the end of the world.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Isn't there some way—?"

"Anubis is sure," he said. "I've got until sunset tomorrow, at the very latest."

I didn't want to hear another impossible deadline. By sunset tonight, we had to save the ghost of an evil magician. By sunset tomorrow, Walt would die. And the sunrise after that, if we were really lucky, we could look forward to Doomsday.

I never liked being thwarted. Whenever I felt like something was impossible, I usually tried even harder out of sheer stubbornness.

But at this point, I felt like Apophis was having a good laugh at my expense.

Oh, you're not a quitter? he seemed to be asking. *How about now? What if we give you a few more impossible tasks? Are you a quitter now?*

Anger made a small hard knot in my gut. I kicked the side of the boat and nearly broke my foot.

Walt blinked. "Carter, it's—"

"*Don't* say it's all right!" I snapped. "It's *not* all right."

I wasn't mad at him. I was mad at the unfairness of his stupid curse, and the fact that I kept failing people who depended on me. My parents had died to give Sadie and me a chance to save the world, which we were close to botching. In Dallas, dozens of good magicians had died because they'd tried to help me. Now we were about to lose Walt.

Sure, he was important to Sadie. But I relied on him just as much. Walt was my unofficial lieutenant at Brooklyn House. The other kids listened to him. He was a calming presence in every crisis, the deciding vote in every debate. I could trust him with any secret—and even with making the execration statue of Apophis, which I couldn't tell my uncle about. If Walt died…

"I won't let it happen," I said. "I refuse."

Wild thoughts ran through my mind: Maybe Anubis was lying to Walt about his imminent death, trying to push Walt away from Sadie. (Okay, unlikely. Sadie wasn't that much of a prize.)

[Yeah, Sadie, I really said that. Just checking to see if you were still paying attention.]

Maybe Walt could beat the odds. People survived cancer miraculously. Why not ancient curses? Maybe we could put him in suspended animation like Iskandar had done for Zia, until we found an antidote. Sure, his family had been searching for a cure unsuccessfully for centuries. Jaz, our best healer, had tried everything with no luck. But maybe we'd overlooked something.

"Carter," Walt said. "Will you let me finish? We've got to make plans."

"How can you be so calm?" I demanded.

Walt fingered his *shen* necklace, the twin of the one he'd given Sadie. "I've known about my curse for years. I won't let it stop me from doing what I need to. One way or another, I'm going to help you beat Apophis."

"How?" I said. "You just told me—"

"Anubis has an idea," Walt said. "He's been helping me make sense of my powers."

"You mean…" I glanced at Walt's hands. Several times I'd seen him turn objects to ashes simply by touching them, the way he'd done to that criosphinx in Dallas. The power didn't come from any of his magic items. None of us understood it, and as Walt's disease progressed, he seemed less and less able to control it, which made me think twice about giving the guy a high five.

Walt flexed his fingers. "Anubis thinks he understands why I have that ability. And there's more. He thinks there might be a way to extend my life."

That was such good news that I let out a shaky laugh. "Why didn't you say so? He can cure you?"

"No," Walt said. "Not a cure. And it's risky. It's never been done before."

"That's what you were talking to Thoth about."

Walt nodded. "Even if Anubis's plan works, there could be…side effects. You might not like it." He lowered his voice. "Sadie might not like it."

Unfortunately, I had a vivid imagination. I envisioned Walt turning into some sort of undead creature—a withered mummy, a ghostly *ba*, or a disfigured demon. In Egyptian magic, side effects could be pretty extreme.

I tried not to let my emotions show. "We want you to live. Don't worry about Sadie."

I could tell from Walt's eyes that he worried about Sadie a lot. Seriously, what did he *see* in my sister?

[Stop hitting me, Sadie. I'm just being honest.]

Walt flexed his fingers. Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I detected wisps of gray steam curling from his hands, as if just talking about his strange power had made it turn active.

"I won't make the decision yet," Walt said. "Not until I'm on my last breath. I want to talk to Sadie first, explain to her…"

He rested his hand on the side of the boat. That was a mistake. The woven reeds turned gray under his touch.

"Walt, stop!" I yelped.

He jerked his hand away, but it was too late. The boat crumbled to ashes.

We lunged for the ropes. Thankfully they did not crumble—maybe because Walt was paying more attention now. Freak squawked as the boat disappeared, and suddenly Walt and I were dangling under the griffin's belly, holding on to the ropes for dear life and bonking into each other as we flew above the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

"Walt!" I yelled over the wind. "You *really* need to get a handle on that power!"

"Sorry!" he shouted back.

My arms were aching, but somehow we made it to Brooklyn House without plummeting to our deaths. Freak set us down on the roof, where Bast was waiting, her mouth agape.

"Why are you swinging from ropes?" she demanded.

"Because it's so fun," I growled. "What's the news?"

Behind the chimneys, a frail voice warbled: "Ha-lllooooo!"

The ancient sun god Ra popped out. He gave us a toothless grin and hobbled around the roof, muttering, "Weasels, weasels. Cookie, cookie, cookie!" He reached into the folds of his loincloth and tossed cookie crumbs in the air like confetti—and yes, it was just as disgusting as it sounds.

Bast tensed her arms, and her knives shot into her hands. Probably just an involuntary reflex; but she looked tempted to use those blades on someone—anyone. She reluctantly slipped the blades back into her sleeves.

"The news?" she said. "I'm on babysitting duty, thanks to your Uncle Amos, who asked me for a favor. And Sadie's *shabti* is waiting for you downstairs. Shall we?"

Explaining Sadie and her *shabti* would take a whole separate recording.

My sister had no talent for crafting magical statues. That didn't stop her from trying. She'd gotten this harebrained idea that she could create the perfect *shabti* to be her avatar, speak with her voice, and do all her chores like a remote-controlled robot. All her previous attempts had exploded or gone haywire, terrorizing Khufu and the initiates. Last week she'd created a magical Thermos with googly eyes that levitated around the room, yelling, "Exterminate! Exterminate!" until it smacked me in the head.

Sadie's latest *shabti* was Sadie Junior—a gardener's nightmare.

Not being much of an artist, Sadie had fashioned a vaguely human figure out of red ceramic flowerpots, held together by magic, string, and duct tape. The face was an upside-down pot with a

smiley face drawn in black marker.

"About time." The pot creature was waiting in my room when Walt and I came in. Its mouth didn't move, but Sadie's voice echoed from inside the face pot as if she were trapped within the *shabti*. That thought made me happy.

"Stop smiling!" she ordered. "I can see you, Carter. Oh…and, uh, hullo, Walt."

The pot monster made squeaky grinding noises as it stood up straight. One clunky arm rose and tried to fix Sadie's nonexistent hair. Leave it to Sadie to be self-conscious around boys, even when she's made out of pots and duct tape.

We traded stories. Sadie told us about the impending attack on the First Nome that was supposed to go down at sunrise on the equinox, and the alliance between Sarah Jacobi's forces and Apophis. Wonderful news. Just great.

In return, I told Sadie about our visit with Thoth. I shared the visions Apophis had shown me about our mother's precarious situation in the Duat (which made the pot monster shudder) and the end of the world (which didn't seem to surprise her at all). I didn't tell Sadie about Apophis's offer to spare me if I gave up Ra. I didn't feel comfortable announcing that with Ra just outside the door, singing songs about cookies. But I told her about the evil ghost Setne, whose trial would start at sunset in the Hall of Judgment.

"Uncle Vinnie," Sadie said.

"Pardon?" I asked.

"The face that spoke to me at the Dallas Museum," she said. "It was obviously Setne himself. He warned me that we would need his help to understand the shadow execration spell. He said we'd have to 'pull some strings' and free him before sunset tonight. He meant the trial. We'll have to convince Dad to free him."

"I did mention that Thoth said he's a murderous psychopath, right?"

The pot monster made a clucking sound. "Carter, it'll be fine. Befriending psychopaths is one of our specialties."

She turned her flowerpot head toward Walt. "You'll be coming along, I hope?"

Her tone had a hint of reproach, like she was still upset that Walt hadn't attended the school dance/mass blackout party.

"I'll be there," he promised. "I'm fine."

He shot me a warning look, but I wasn't going to contradict him. Whatever he and Anubis were plotting, I could wait for him to explain it to Sadie. Jumping in the middle of the whole Sadie-Walt-Anubis drama sounded about as much fun as diving into a food processor.

"Right," Sadie said. "We'll meet you two at the Hall of Judgment before sunset tonight. That should give us time to finish up."

"Finish up?" I asked. "And who is *us*?"

It's hard to read expressions on a smiley-face pot, but Sadie's hesitation told me enough. "You aren't in the First Nome anymore," I guessed. "What are you doing?"

"A small errand," Sadie said. "I'm off to see Bes."

I frowned. Sadie went to see Bes in his nursing home almost every week, which was fine and all, but why now? "Uh, you do understand we're in a hurry."

"It's necessary," she insisted. "I've got an idea that might help us with our shadow project. Don't fret. Zia's with me."

"Zia?" It was my turn to feel self-conscious. If I were a flowerpot, I would've checked my hair. "That's why Bast is watching Ra today? Why exactly are you and Zia—?"

"Stop worrying," Sadie chided. "I'll take good care of her. And no, Carter, she hasn't been talking about you. I have no idea how she feels about you."

"What?" I wanted to punch Sadie Junior in her ceramic face. "I didn't say anything like that!"

"Now, now," she chided. "I don't think Zia cares what you wear. It's not a date. Just please brush your teeth for once."

"I'm going to kill you," I said.

"Love you too, brother, dear. Ta!"

The pottery creature crumbled into pieces, leaving a mound of shards and a red clay face smiling up at me.

Walt and I joined Bast outside my room. We leaned on the rail overlooking the Great Room while Ra skipped back and forth on the balcony, singing nursery songs in Ancient Egyptian.

Down below, our initiates were getting ready for the school day. Julian had a breakfast sausage sticking out of his mouth as he rummaged through his backpack. Felix and Sean were arguing over who stole whose math textbook. Little Shelby was chasing the other ankle-biters with a fistful of crayons that shot rainbow-colored sparks.

I'd never had a big family, but living at Brooklyn House, I felt like I had a dozen brothers and sisters. Despite the craziness, I enjoyed it…which made my next decision even harder.

I told Bast about our plan to visit the Hall of Judgment.

"I don't like it," she said.

Walt managed a laugh. "Is there a plan you'd like better?"

She tilted her head. "Now that you mention it, no. I don't like plans. I'm a cat. Still, if half the things I've heard about Setne are true—"

"I know," I said. "But it's our only shot."

She wrinkled her nose. "You don't want me to come along? You're sure? Maybe I could get Nut or Shu to watch Ra—"

"No," I said. "Amos is going to need help at the First Nome. He doesn't have the numbers to fend off an attack from both the rebel magicians and Apophis."

Bast nodded. "I can't enter the First Nome, but I can patrol outside. If Apophis shows himself, I will engage him in battle."

"He'll be at full strength," Walt warned. "He's getting stronger by the hour."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "I've fought him before, Walt Stone. I know him better than anyone. Besides, I owe it to Carter's family. And to Lord Ra."

"Kitty!" Ra appeared behind us, patted Bast on the head, and skipped away. "Meow, meow, meow!"

Watching him prance around, I wanted to scream and throw things. We'd risked everything to

revive the old sun god, hoping we'd get a divine pharaoh who could stand toe-to-toe with Apophis. Instead we got a wrinkly, bald troll in a loincloth.

Give me Ra, Apophis had urged. *I know you hate him.*

I tried to put it out of my mind, but I couldn't quite shake that image of an island in the Sea of Chaos—a personal paradise where the people I loved would be safe. I knew it was a lie. Apophis would never deliver on that promise. But I could understand how Sarah Jacobi and Kwai might be tempted.

Besides, Apophis knew how to strike a nerve. I *did* resent Ra for being so weak. Horus agreed with me.

We don't need the old fool. The war god's voice spoke inside my head. *I'm not saying you should give him to Apophis, but he is useless. We should put him aside and take the throne of the gods for ourselves.*

He made it sound so tempting—such an obvious solution.

But, no. If Apophis wanted me to give up Ra, then Ra must be valuable in some way. The sun god still had a role to play. I just had to figure out what it was.

"Carter?" Bast frowned. "I know you're worried about me, but your parents saved me from the abyss for a reason. Your mother foresaw that I would make a difference in the final battle. I will fight Apophis to the death if necessary. He won't get past me."

I wavered. Bast had already helped us so much. She had almost been destroyed fighting the crocodile god Sobek. She'd enlisted her friend Bes to help us, and then seen him reduced to an empty shell. She'd helped us restore her old master, Ra, to the world, and now she was stuck babysitting him. I didn't want to ask her to face Apophis again, but she was right. She knew the enemy better than anyone—except maybe Ra, when he was in his right mind.

"All right," I said. "But Amos will need more help than you can give, Bast. He'll need magicians."

Walt frowned. "Who? After the disaster in Dallas, we don't have many friends left. We could contact São Paulo and Vancouver—they're still with us—but they won't be able to spare many people. They'll be worried about protecting their own nomes."

I shook my head. "Amos needs magicians who know the path of the gods. He needs *us*. All of us."

Walt digested that silently. "You mean, abandon Brooklyn House."

Below us, the ankle-biters shrieked with joy as Shelby tried to tag them with her sparking crayons. Khufu sat on the fireplace mantel eating Cheerios, watching ten-year-old Tucker bounce a basketball off the statue of Thoth. Jaz was putting a bandage on Alyssa's forehead. (Probably she'd been attacked by Sadie's rogue Thermos, which was still on the loose.) In the middle of all this, Cleo was sitting on the sofa, engrossed in a book.

Brooklyn House was the first real home some of them had ever known. We'd promised to keep them safe and teach them to use their powers. Now I was about to send them unprepared into the most dangerous battle of all time.

"Carter," Bast said, "they're not ready."

"They *have* to be," I said. "If the First Nome falls, it's all over. Apophis will attack us in Egypt,

at the source of our power. We have to stand together with the Chief Lector."

"One last battle." Walt gazed sadly at the Great Room, maybe wondering whether or not he'd die before that battle happened. "Should we break the news to others?"

"Not yet," I said. "The rebel magicians' attack on the First Nome won't happen until tomorrow. Let the kids have one last day at school. Bast, when they come home this afternoon, I want you to lead them to Egypt. Use Freak, use whatever magic you have to. If all goes well in the Underworld, Sadie and I will join you before the attack."

"If all goes well," Bast said dryly. "Yes, that happens a lot."

She glanced over at the sun god, who was trying to eat the doorknob to Sadie's room. "What about Ra?" she asked. "If Apophis is going to attack in two days…"

"Ra has to keep making his nightly journey," I said. "That's part of Ma'at. We can't mess with it. But on the morning of the equinox, he'll need to be in Egypt. He'll have to face Apophis."

"Like *that*?" Bast gestured toward the old god. "In his loincloth?"

"I know," I admitted. "It sounds crazy. But Apophis still thinks Ra is a threat. Maybe facing Apophis in battle will remind Ra who he is. He might rise to the challenge and become…what he used to be."

Walt and Bast didn't answer. I could tell from their expressions that they didn't buy it. Neither did I. Ra was gumming Sadie's doorknob with intent to kill, but I didn't think he'd be much good against the Lord of Chaos.

Still, it felt good to have a plan of action. That was much better than standing around, dwelling on the hopelessness of our situation.

"Use today to organize," I told Bast. "Gather up the most valuable scrolls, amulets, weapons—anything we can use to help the First Nome. Let Amos know you're coming. Walt and I will head to the Underworld and meet Sadie. We'll rendezvous with you in Cairo."

Bast pursed her lips. "All right, Carter. But be careful of Setne. However bad you think he is? He's ten times worse."

"Hey, we defeated the god of evil," I reminded her.

Bast shook her head. "Set is a god. He doesn't change. Even with a god of Chaos, you can pretty much predict how he'll act. Setne, on the other hand…he has both power *and* human unpredictability. Don't trust him. Swear to me."

"That's easy," I said. "I promise."

Walt folded his arms. "So how are we going to get to the Underworld? Portals are unreliable. We're leaving Freak here, and the boat is destroyed—"

"I have another boat in mind," I said, trying to believe it was a good idea. "I'm going to summon an old friend."

SADIE

9. Zia Breaks Up a Lava Fight

I'D BECOME QUITE AN EXPERT at visiting the godly nursing home—which was a sad statement on my life.

The first time Carter and I found our way there, we had traveled the River of Night, plunged down a fiery waterfall, and almost died in a lake of lava. Since then, I'd discovered I could simply call on Isis to transport me, as she could open doorways to many locations in the Duat. Honestly, though, dealing with Isis was almost as annoying as swimming through fire.

After my *shabti* conversation with Carter, I joined Zia on a limestone cliff overlooking the Nile. It was already midday in Egypt. Getting over portal-lag had taken me longer than I'd expected. After changing into more sensible clothes, I'd had a quick lunch and one more strategy talk with Amos deep in the Hall of Ages. Then Zia and I had climbed back to the surface. Now we stood at a ruined shrine to Isis on the river just south of Cairo. It was a good place to summon the goddess, but we didn't have much time.

Zia still wore her combat outfit—camouflage cargo pants and an olive tank top. Her staff was slung over her back, and her wand hung at her belt. She rummaged through her pack, checking her supplies one last time.

"What did Carter say?" she asked.

[That's right, brother dear. I stepped out of earshot before I contacted you, so Zia didn't hear any of those teasing comments. Honestly, I'm not *that* mean.]

I told her what we'd discussed, but I couldn't bring myself to share how my mum's spirit was in danger. I'd known about the problem in general terms since I'd spoken with Anubis, of course, but the knowledge that our mother's ghost was huddled under a cliff somewhere in the Duat, resisting the pull of the serpent's shadow—well, that bit of information had lodged in my chest like a bullet. If I tried to touch it, I feared it would go straight to my heart and kill me.

I explained about my villainous ghost friend Uncle Vinnie, and how we intended to solicit his help.

Zia looked appalled. "Setne? As in *the* Setne? Does Carter realize—?"

"Yep."

"And Thoth suggested this?"

"Yep."

"And you're actually going along with it?"

"Yep."

She gazed down the Nile. Perhaps she was thinking of her home village, which had stood on the banks of this river until it was destroyed by the forces of Apophis. Perhaps she was imagining her entire homeland crumbling into the Sea of Chaos.

I expected her to tell me that our plan was insane. I thought she might abandon me and go back to the First Nome.

But I suppose she had got used to the Kane family—poor girl. She must've known by now that *all* our plans were insane.

"Fine," she said. "How do we reach this…nursing home of the gods?"

"Just a mo'." I closed my eyes and concentrated.

Yoo-hoo, Isis? I thought. *Anyone home?*

Sadie, the goddess answered immediately.

In my mind she appeared as a regal woman with dark braided hair. Her dress was gossamer white. Her prismatic wings shimmered like sunlight rippling through clear water.

I wanted to smack her.

Well, well, I said. *If it isn't my good friend who decides whom I can and can't date.*

She had the nerve to look surprised. *Are you speaking of Anubis?*

Right, first try! I should've left it at that since I needed Isis's help. But seeing her floating there all shiny and queenly made me angrier than ever. *Where do you get the nerve, eh? Going behind my back, lobbying to keep Anubis away from me. How is that your business?*

Surprisingly, Isis kept her temper. *Sadie, there are things you don't understand. There are rules.*

Rules? I demanded. *The world is about to end, and you're worried about which boys are socially acceptable for me?*

Isis steepled her fingers. *The two issues are more connected than you realize. The traditions of Ma'at must be followed, or Chaos wins. Immortals and mortals can only interact in specific, limited ways. Besides, you cannot afford to be distracted. I'm doing you a favor.*

A favor! I said. *If you want to do me a* real *favor, we need passage to the Fourth House of the Night—the House of Rest, Sunny Acres, or whatever you want to call it. After that, you can butt out of my private life!*

Perhaps that was rude of me, but Isis had stepped over the line. Besides, why should I act proper with a goddess who had previously rented space in my head? Isis should have known me better!

The goddess sighed. *Sadie, proximity to the gods is dangerous. It must be regulated with utmost care. You know this. Your uncle is still tainted from his experience with Set. Even your friend Zia is struggling.*

What do you mean? I asked.

If you join with me, you'll understand, Isis promised. *Your mind will be clear. It's past time we united again and combined our strength.*

There it was: the sales pitch. Every time I called on Isis, she tried to persuade me to meld with her as we'd done before—mortal and god inhabiting one body, acting with a single will. Each time, I

said no.

So, I ventured, *proximity to the gods is dangerous, but you're anxious to join forces with me again. I'm glad you're looking out for my safety.*

Isis narrowed her eyes. *Our situation is different, Sadie. You need my strength.*

Certainly it was tempting. Having the full power of a goddess at my command was quite a rush. As the Eye of Isis, I would feel confident, unstoppable, completely without fear. One could get addicted to such power—and that was the problem.

Isis could be a good friend, but her agenda wasn't always best for the mortal world—or for Sadie Kane.

She was driven by her loyalty to her son Horus. She'd do anything to see him on the throne of the gods. She was ambitious, vengeful, power-hungry, and envious of anyone who might have more magic than she did.

She claimed my mind would be clearer if I let her in. What she really meant was that I'd start seeing things her way. It would be harder to separate my thoughts from hers. I might even come to believe she was right by keeping Anubis and me apart. (Horrifying idea.)

Unfortunately, Isis had a point about joining forces. Sooner or later we'd have to. There was no other way I'd have the power to challenge Apophis.

But now wasn't the time. I wanted to remain Sadie Kane as long as possible—just my own wonderful self without any godly hitchhiker.

Soon, I told Isis. *I have things to do first. I need to be sure my decisions are my own. Now, about that doorway to the House of Rest…*

Isis was quite good at looking hurt and disapproving at the same time, which must have made her an impossible mother. I almost felt sorry for Horus.

Sadie Kane, she said, *you are my favorite mortal, my chosen magician. And still you do not trust me.*

I didn't bother to contradict her. Isis knew how I felt.

The goddess spread her arms in resignation. *Very well. But the path of the gods is the only answer. For all the Kanes, and for that one.* She nodded in Zia's direction. *You will need to advise her, Sadie. She must learn the path quickly.*

What do you mean? I asked again. I really wished she would stop talking in riddles. Gods are so annoying that way.

Zia was a much more experienced magician than I was. I didn't know how I could advise her. Besides, Zia was a fire elementalist. She tolerated us Kanes, but she had never shown the slightest interest in the path of the gods.

Good luck, Isis said. *I will await your call.*

The image of the goddess rippled and vanished. When I opened my eyes, a square of darkness the size of a doorway hovered in the air.

"Sadie?" Zia asked. "You were silent for so long, I was getting worried."

"No need." I tried for a smile. "Isis just likes to talk. Next stop, the Fourth House of the Night."

I'll be honest. I never quite understood the difference between the swirling sand portals that

magicians can summon with artifacts and the doors of darkness that gods are able to conjure. Perhaps the gods use a more advanced wireless network. Perhaps they simply have better aim.

Whatever the reason, Isis's portal worked much more reliably than the one I'd created to get to Cairo. It deposited us right in the lobby of Sunny Acres.

As soon as we stepped through, Zia scanned our surroundings and frowned. "Where is everyone?"

Good question. We'd arrived at the correct godly nursing home—the same potted plants, the same massive lobby with windows looking out on the Lake of Fire, the same rows of limestone columns plastered with tacky posters of smiling seniors and mottos like: *These Are Your Golden Centuries!*

But the nurses' station was unattended. IV poles were clustered in one corner like they were having a conference. The sofas were empty. The coffee tables were littered with half-played games of checkers and senet. Ugh, I *hate* senet.

I stared at an empty wheelchair, wondering where its occupant had gone, when suddenly the chair burst into flames, collapsing in a pile of charred leather and half-melted steel.

I stumbled backward. Behind me, Zia held a ball of white-hot fire in her hand. Her eyes were as wild as a cornered animal's.

"Are you mad?" I yelled. "What are you—?"

She lobbed her second fireball at the nurses' station. A vase full of daisies exploded in a shower of flaming petals and pottery shards.

"Zia!"

She didn't seem to hear me. She summoned another fireball and took aim at the sofas.

I should have run for cover. I wasn't prepared to die saving badly upholstered furniture. Instead, I lunged at her and grabbed her wrist. "Zia, stop it!"

She glared at me with flames in her eyes—and I mean that quite literally. Her irises had become disks of orange fire.

This was terrifying, of course, but I stood my ground. Over the past year I'd got rather used to surprises—what with my cat being a goddess, my brother turning into a falcon, and Felix producing penguins in the fireplace several times a week.

"Zia," I said firmly. "We can't burn down the nursing home. What's got into you?"

A look of confusion passed over her face. She stopped struggling. Her eyes returned to normal.

She stared at the melted wheelchair, then the smoldering remains of the bouquet on the carpet. "Did I—?"

"Decide those daisies needed to die?" I finished. "Yes, you did."

She extinguished her fireball, which was lucky, as it was starting to bake my face. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "I—I thought I had it under control…."

"Under control?" I let go of her hand. "You mean to say you've been throwing *a lot* of random fireballs lately?"

She still looked bewildered, her gaze drifting around the lobby. "N-no…maybe. I've been having blackouts. I come to, and I don't remember what I've done."

"Like just now?"

She nodded. "Amos said…at first he thought it might be a side effect of my time in that tomb."

Ah, the tomb. For months, Zia had been trapped in a watery sarcophagus while her *shabti* ran about impersonating her. The Chief Lector Iskandar had thought this would protect the real Zia—from Set? From Apophis? We still weren't sure. At any rate, it didn't strike me as the most brilliant idea for a supposedly wise two-thousand-year-old magician to have come up with. During her slumbers, Zia had endured horrible nightmares about her village burning and Apophis destroying the world. I suppose that might lead to some nasty post-traumatic stress.

"You said Amos thought that *at first*," I noted. "There's more to the story, then?"

Zia gazed at the melted wheelchair. The light from outside turned her hair the color of rusted iron.

"He was here," she murmured. "He was here for eons, trapped."

I took a moment to process that. "You mean Ra."

"He was miserable and alone," she said. "He had been forced to abdicate his throne. He left the mortal world and lost the will to live."

I stamped out a smoldering daisy on the carpet. "I don't know, Zia. He looked quite happy when we woke him up, singing and grinning and so on."

"No." Zia walked toward the windows, as if drawn by the lovely view of brimstone. "His mind is still sleeping. I've spent time with him, Sadie. I've watched his expressions while he naps. I've heard him whimpering and mumbling. That old body is a cage, a prison. The true Ra is trapped inside."

She was starting to worry me now. Fireballs I could deal with. Incoherent rambling—not so much.

"I suppose it makes sense you'd have sympathy with Ra," I ventured. "You're a fire elementalist. He's a fiery sort of god. You were trapped in that tomb. Ra was trapped in a nursing home. Perhaps that's what caused your blackout just now. This place reminded you of your own imprisonment."

That's right—Sadie Kane, junior psychologist. And why not? I'd spent enough time diagnosing my crazed mates Liz and Emma back in London.

Zia stared out at the burning lake. I had the feeling that my attempt at therapy might not have been so therapeutic.

"Amos tried to help me," she said. "He knows what I'm going through. He cast a spell on me to focus my mind, but…" She shook her head. "It's been getting worse. This is the first day in weeks that I *haven't* taken care of Ra, and the more time I spend with him, the fuzzier my thoughts get. When I summon fire now, I have trouble controlling it. Even simple spells I've done for years—I channel too much power. If that happens during a blackout…"

I understood why she sounded frightened. Magicians have to be careful with spells. If we channel too much power, we might inadvertently exhaust our reserves. Then the spell would tap directly into the magician's life force—with unpleasant consequences.

You will need to advise her, Isis had told me. *She must learn the path quickly.*

An uncomfortable thought began to form. I remembered Ra's delight when he had first met Zia, the way he'd tried to give her his last remaining scarab beetle. He'd babbled on and on about

zebras…possibly meaning Zia. And now Zia was starting to empathize with the old god, even trying to burn down the nursing home where he'd been trapped for so long.

That couldn't be good. But how could I advise her when I had no idea what was happening?

Isis's warnings rattled around in my head: The path of the gods was the answer for all the Kanes. Zia was struggling. Amos was still tainted by his time with Set.

"Zia…" I hesitated. "You said Amos knows what you're going through. Is that why he asked Bast to watch Ra today? To give you time away from the sun god?"

"I—I suppose."

I tried to steady my breathing. Then I asked the harder question: "In the war room, Amos said he might have to use other means to fight his enemies. He hasn't…um, he hasn't been having trouble with Set?"

Zia wouldn't meet my eyes. "Sadie, I promised him—"

"Oh, gods of Egypt! He's *calling* on Set? Trying to channel his power, after all Set did to him? Please, no."

She didn't answer, which was an answer in itself.

"He'll be overwhelmed!" I cried. "If the rebel magicians find out that the Chief Lector is meddling with the god of evil, just as they suspected—"

"Set isn't just the god of evil," Zia reminded me. "He is Ra's lieutenant. He defended the sun god against Apophis."

"You think that makes it all better?" I shook my head in disbelief. "And now Amos thinks you're having trouble with Ra? Does he think Ra is trying to…" I pointed to Zia's head.

"Sadie, please…" Her voice trailed off in misery.

I suppose it wasn't fair for me to press her. She seemed even more confused than I was.

Still, I hated the idea of Zia being disoriented so close to our final battle—blacking out, throwing random fireballs, losing control of her own power. Even worse was the possibility that Amos had some sort of link with Set—that he might actually have *chosen* to let that horrible god back into his head.

The thought tied my gut into *tyets*—Isis knots.

I imagined my old enemy Michel Desjardins scowling. *Ne voyez-vous pas, Sadie Kane? This is what comes from the path of the gods. This is why the magic was forbidden.*

I kicked the melted remains of the wheelchair. One bent wheel squeaked and wobbled.

"We'll have to table that conversation," I decided. "We're running out of time. Now…where have all the old folks gone?"

Zia pointed out the window. "There," she said calmly. "They're having a beach day."

We made our way down to the black sand beach by the Lake of Fire. It wouldn't have been my top vacation spot, but elderly gods were lounging on deck chairs under brightly colored umbrellas. Others snored on beach towels or sat in their wheelchairs and stared at the boiling vista.

One shriveled bird-headed goddess in a one-piece bathing suit was building a sand pyramid. Two old men—I assumed they were fire gods—stood waist-deep in the blazing surf, laughing and

splashing lava in each other's faces.

Tawaret the caretaker beamed when she saw us.

"Sadie!" she called. "You're early this week! And you've brought a friend."

Normally, I wouldn't have stood still as an upright grinning female hippo charged toward me for a hug, but I'd got used to Tawaret.

She'd traded her high heels for flip-flops. Otherwise she was dressed in her usual white nurse's uniform. Her mascara and lipstick were tastefully done, for a hippo, and her luxuriant black hair was pinned under a nurse's cap. Her ill-fitting blouse opened over an enormous belly—possibly a sign of permanent pregnancy, as she was the goddess of childbirth, or possibly a sign of eating too many cupcakes. I'd never been entirely sure.

She embraced me without crushing me, which I greatly appreciated. Her lilac perfume reminded me of my Gran, and the tinge of sulfur on her clothes reminded me of Gramps.

"Tawaret," I said, "this is Zia Rashid."

Tawaret's smile faded. "Oh…Oh, I see."

I'd never seen the hippo goddess so uneasy. Did she somehow know that Zia had melted her wheelchair and torched her daisies?

As the silence got awkward, Tawaret recovered her smile. "Sorry, yes. Hello, Zia. It's just that you look…well, never mind! Are you a friend of Bes's too?"

"Uh, not really," Zia admitted. "I mean, I suppose, but—"

"We're here on a mission," I said. "Things in the upper world have gone a bit wonky."

I told Tawaret about the rebel magicians, Apophis's plans for attack, and our mad scheme to find the serpent's shadow and stomp it to death.

Tawaret mashed her hippoish hands together. "Oh, dear. Doomsday tomorrow? Bingo night was supposed to be Friday. My poor darlings will be so disappointed.…"

She glanced down the beach at her senile charges, some of whom were drooling in their sleep or eating black sand or trying to talk to the lava.

Tawaret sighed. "I suppose it would be kinder not to tell them. They've been here for eons, forgotten by the mortal world. Now they have to perish along with everyone else. They don't deserve such a fate."

I wanted to remind her that *no one* deserved such a fate—not my friends, not my family, and certainly not a brilliant young woman named Sadie Kane, who had her whole life ahead of her. But Tawaret was so kindhearted, I didn't want to sound selfish. She didn't seem concerned for herself at all, just the fading gods she cared for.

"We're not giving up yet," I promised.

"But this plan of yours!" Tawaret shuddered, causing a tsunami of jiggling hippo flesh. "It's impossible!"

"Like reviving the sun god?" I asked.

She conceded that with a shrug. "Very well, dear. I'll admit you've done the impossible before. Nevertheless…" She glanced at Zia, as if my friend's presence still made her nervous. "Well, I'm sure you know what you're doing. How can I help?"

"May we see Bes?" I asked.

"Of course…but I'm afraid he hasn't changed."

She led us down the beach. The past few months I'd visited Bes at least once a week, so I knew many of the elderly gods by sight. I spotted Heket the frog goddess perched atop a beach umbrella as if it were a lily pad. Her tongue shot out to catch something from the air. Did they have flies in the Duat?

Farther on, I saw the goose god Gengen-Wer, whose name—I kid you not—meant the Great Honker. The first time Tawaret told me that, I almost spewed tea. His Supreme Honkiness was waddling along the beach, squawking at the other gods and startling them out of their sleep.

Yet every time I visited, the crowd changed. Some gods disappeared. Others popped up—gods of cities that no longer existed; gods who had only been worshipped for a few centuries before being replaced by others; gods so old, they'd forgot their own names. Most civilizations left behind pottery shards or monuments or literature. Egypt was so old, it had left behind a landfill's worth of deities.

Halfway down the beach, we passed the two old codgers who'd been playing in the lava. Now they were wrestling waist-deep in the lake. One pummeled the other with an *ankh* and warbled, "It's *my* pudding! *My* pudding!"

"Oh dear," Tawaret said. "Fire-embracer and Hot Foot are at it again."

I choked back a laugh. "Hot Foot? What sort of godly name is that?"

Tawaret studied the fiery surf, as if looking for a way to navigate through it without getting incinerated. "They're gods from the Hall of Judgment, dear. Poor things. There used to be forty-two of them, each in charge of judging a different crime. Even in the old days, we could never keep them all straight. Now…" She shrugged. "They're quite forgotten, sadly. Fire-embracer, the one with the *ankh*—he used to be the god of robberies. I'm afraid it made him paranoid. He always thinks Hot Foot has stolen his pudding. I'll have to break up the fight."

"Let me," Zia said.

Tawaret stiffened. "You, my…dear?"

I got the feeling she was going to say something other than *dear*.

"The fire won't bother me," Zia assured her. "You two go ahead."

I wasn't sure how Zia could be so confident. Perhaps she simply preferred swimming in flames to seeing Bes in his present state. If so, I couldn't blame her. The experience was unsettling.

Whatever the case, Zia strode toward the surf and waded straight in like a flame-retardant *Baywatch* lifeguard.

Tawaret and I continued along the beach. We reached the dock where Ra's sun boat had anchored the first time Carter and I had visited this place.

Bes sat at the end of the pier in a comfy leather chair, which Tawaret must have brought down especially for him. He wore a fresh red-and-blue Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts. His face was thinner than it had been last spring, but otherwise he looked unchanged—the same scraggly nest of black hair, the same bristly mane that passed for a beard, the same lovably grotesque face that reminded me of a pug dog's.

But Bes's soul was gone. He stared vacantly at the lake, not reacting at all when I knelt next to him and gripped his furry hand.

I remembered the first time he'd saved my life—picking me up in a limo full of rubbish, driving me to Waterloo Bridge, then scaring away two gods who had been chasing me. He had jumped out of the car wearing nothing but a Speedo and screamed, "Boo!"

Yes, he'd been a true friend.

"Dear Bes," I said, "we're going to try to help you."

I told him everything that had happened since my last visit. I knew he couldn't hear me. Since his secret name had been stolen, his mind simply wasn't there. But talking to him made me feel better.

Tawaret sniffled. I knew she had loved Bes forever, though Bes hadn't always returned her feelings. He couldn't have had a better caretaker.

"Oh, Sadie…" The hippo goddess wiped away a tear. "If you truly could help him, I—I'd do anything. But how is it possible?"

"Shadows," I said. "This bloke Setne…he found a way to use shadows for an execration spell. If the *sheut* is a backup copy of the soul, and if Setne's magic could be used in reverse…"

Tawaret's eyes widened. "You believe you could use Bes's shadow to bring him back?"

"Yes." I knew it sounded mad, but I *had* to believe. Saying it aloud to Tawaret, who cared about Bes even more than I did…well, I simply couldn't let her down. Besides, if we could do this for Bes, then who knew? Perhaps we could use the same magic to get the sun god Ra back in fighting shape. First things first, however. I intended to keep my promise to the dwarf god.

"Here's the tricky bit," I said. "I'm hoping you can help me locate Bes's shadow. I don't know much about gods and their *sheuts* and whatnot. I understand that you often hide them?"

Tawaret shifted nervously, her feet creaking on the pier boards. "Um, yes…"

"I'm hoping they're a bit like secret names," I forged on. "Since I can't ask Bes where he keeps his shadow, I thought I'd ask the person who was closest to him. I thought you'd have the best chance of knowing."

Seeing a hippo blush is quite odd. It almost made Tawaret look delicate—in a massive sort of way.

"I—I saw his shadow once," she admitted. "During one of our best moments together. We were sitting on the temple wall in Saïs."

"Sorry?"

"A city in the Nile Delta," Tawaret explained. "The home of a friend of ours—the hunting goddess Neith. She liked to invite Bes and me on her hunting excursions. We would, ah, flush her prey for her."

I imagined Tawaret and Bes, two gods with super-ugly powers, plowing through the marshes hand in hand, yelling "Boo!" to scare up bevies of quail. I decided to keep that image to myself.

"At any rate," Tawaret continued, "one night after dinner, Bes and I were sitting alone on the walls of Neith's temple, watching the moon rise over the Nile."

She gazed at the dwarf god with such adoring eyes, I couldn't help but imagine myself on that temple wall, sharing a romantic evening with Anubis…no, Walt…no… Gah! My life was horrid.

I sighed unhappily. "Go on, please."

"We talked about nothing in particular," Tawaret remembered. "We held hands. That was all. But I felt so close to him. Just for a moment, I looked at the mud-brick wall next to us, and I saw Bes's

shadow in the torchlight. Normally gods don't keep their shadows so close. He must've trusted me a great deal to reveal it. I asked him about it, and he laughed. He said, 'This is a good place for my shadow. I think I'll leave it here. That way it can always be happy, even when I'm not.'"

The story was so sweet and sad, I could hardly bear it.

Down the shore, the old god Fire-embracer shrieked something about pudding. Zia was standing in the surf, trying to keep the two gods apart as they splashed her with lava from both sides. Amazingly, it didn't seem to bother her.

I turned to Tawaret. "That night in Saïs—how long ago was it?"

"A few thousand years."

My heart sank. "Any chance the shadow would still be there?"

She shrugged helplessly. "Saïs was destroyed centuries ago. The temple is gone. Farmers pulled down the ancient buildings and used the mud bricks for fertilizer. Most of the land has reverted to marshes."

Blast. I'd never been a fan of Egyptian ruins. From time to time, I'd been tempted to pull down a few temples myself. But just this once, I wished the ruins had survived. I wanted to cuff those farmers.

"Then there's no hope?" I asked.

"Oh, there's always hope," Tawaret said. "You could search the area, calling on Bes's shadow. You're his friend. It might appear to you if it's still there. And if Neith is still in the area, she might be able to help. That is, if she doesn't hunt you instead…"

I decided not to dwell on that possibility. I had enough problems. "We'll have to try. If we can find the shadow and puzzle out the proper spell—"

"But, Sadie," the goddess said, "you have so little time. You have to stop Apophis! How can you help Bes, too?"

I looked at the dwarf god. Then I bent down and kissed his bumpy forehead. "I made a promise," I said. "Besides, we'll need him if we're going to win."

Did I really believe that? I knew Bes couldn't scare Apophis away simply by yelling "Boo!" no matter how ghastly he looked in his Speedo. In the sort of battle we were facing, I wasn't sure one more god would even make a difference. And I was even less sure that this reverse shadow idea could work on Ra. But I had to try with Bes. If the world ended the day after tomorrow, I would *not* go to my death without first knowing I'd done everything I could to save my friend.

Of all the goddesses I'd met, Tawaret was the most likely to understand my motives.

She put her hands protectively on Bes's shoulders. "In that case, Sadie Kane, I wish you luck—for Bes, and for all of us."

I left her on the dock, standing behind Bes as if the two gods were enjoying a romantic sunset together.

On the beach, I rejoined Zia, who was brushing ashes out of her hair. Except for a few burn holes in her trousers, she looked perfectly fine.

She gestured at Fire-embracer and Hot Foot, who were once again playing nice in the lava. "They're not so bad," Zia said. "They just needed some attention."

"Like pets," I said. "Or my brother."

Zia actually smiled. “Did you find the information you need?”

“I think so,” I said. “But first, we need to get to the Hall of Judgment. It’s almost time for Setne’s trial.”

“How do we get there?” Zia asked. “Another doorway?”

I stared across the Lake of Fire, pondering that problem. I remembered the Hall of Judgment being on an island somewhere on this lake, but Duat geography is a bit dodgy. For all I knew, the hall was on a totally different level of the Duat, or the lake was six billion miles wide. I didn’t fancy the idea of walking around the shore through unknown territory, or taking a swim. And I certainly didn’t feel like arguing with Isis again.

Then I saw something across the fiery waves—the silhouette of a familiar steamboat approaching, twin smokestacks trailing luminous gold smoke and a paddle wheel churning through the lava.

My brother—bless his heart—was absolutely mad.

“Problem solved,” I told Zia. “Carter will give us a ride.”

SADIE

10. “Take Your Daughter to Work Day” Goes Horribly Wrong

AS THEY APPROACHED THE DOCK, Carter and Walt waved at us from the bow of the *Egyptian Queen*. Next to them stood the captain, Bloodstained Blade, who looked quite dashing in his riverboat pilot’s uniform, except for the fact that his head was a blood-speckled double-sided ax.

“That’s a demon,” Zia said nervously.

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Is it safe?”

I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Of course not,” she muttered. “I’m traveling with the Kanes.”

The crew of glowing orbs zipped around the boat, pulling lines and lowering the gangplank.

Carter looked tired. He wore jeans and a rumpled shirt with specks of barbecue sauce on it. His hair was wet and flat on one side as if he’d fallen asleep in the shower.

Walt looked much better—well, really, there was no contest. He wore his usual sleeveless shirt and workout pants, and managed a smile for me even though his posture made it obvious he was in pain. The *shen* charm on my necklace seemed to heat up, or perhaps that was just my body temperature rising.

Zia and I climbed the gangplank. Bloodstained Blade bowed, which was quite unnerving, as his head could’ve sliced a watermelon in half.

“Welcome aboard, Lady Kane.” His voice was a metallic hum from the edge of his frontal blade. “I am at your service.”

“Thanks ever so,” I said. “Carter, may I speak with you?”

I grabbed his ear and pulled him toward the deckhouse.

“Ow!” he complained as I dragged him along. I suppose doing that in front of Zia wasn’t nice, but I thought I might as well give her pointers on how best to handle my brother.

Walt and Zia followed us into the main dining room. As usual, the mahogany table was laden with platters of fresh food. The chandelier illuminated colorful wall murals of Egyptian gods, the gilded columns, and the ornately molded ceiling.

I let go of Carter’s ear and snarled, “Have you lost your mind?”

“Ow!” he yelled again. “What is your problem?”

“My problem,” I said, lowering my voice, “is that you summoned this boat again and its demon captain, who Bast warned would slit our throats if he ever got the opportunity!”

"He's under a magic binding," Carter argued. "He was *fine* last time."

"Last time *Bast* was with us," I reminded him. "And if you think I trust a demon named Bloodstained Blade farther than I can—"

"Guys," Walt interrupted.

Bloodstained Blade entered the dining room, dipping his ax head under the doorframe. "Lord and Lady Kane, the journey is short from here. We will arrive at the Hall of Judgment in approximately twenty minutes."

"Thanks, BSB," Carter said as he rubbed his ear. "We'll join you on deck soon."

"Very good," said the demon. "What are your orders when we arrive?"

I tensed, hoping Carter had thought ahead. Bast had warned us that demons needed very clear instructions to stay under control.

"You'll wait for us while we visit the Hall of Judgment," Carter announced. "When we return, you'll take us where we wish to go."

"As you say." Bloodstained Blade's tone had a hint of disappointment—or was that my imagination?

After he left, Zia frowned. "Carter, in this case I agree with Sadie. How can you trust that creature? Where did you get this ship?"

"It belonged to our parents," Carter said.

He and I shared a look, silently agreeing that was enough said. Our mum and dad had sailed this riverboat up the Thames to Cleopatra's Needle the night Mum had died releasing Bast from the abyss. Afterward, Dad had sat in this very room, grieving, with only the cat goddess and the demon captain for company.

Bloodstained Blade had accepted us as his new masters. He'd followed our orders before, but that was little comfort. I didn't trust him. I didn't like being on this ship.

On the other hand, we needed to get to the Hall of Judgment. I was hungry and thirsty, and I supposed I could endure a twenty-minute voyage if it meant enjoying a chilled Ribena and a plate of tandoori chicken with naan.

The four of us sat around the table. We ate while we compared stories. All in all, it was quite possibly the most awkward double date in history. We had no shortage of dire emergencies to talk about, but the tension in the room was as thick as Cairo smog.

Carter hadn't seen Zia in person for months. I could tell he was trying not to stare. Zia was clearly uncomfortable sitting so close to him. She kept leaning away, which no doubt hurt his feelings. Perhaps she was just worried about having another fireball-throwing episode. As for me, I was elated to be next to Walt, but at the same time, I was desperately worried about him. I couldn't forget how he'd looked wrapped in glowing mummy linen, and I wondered what Anubis had wanted to tell me about Walt's situation. Walt tried to hide it, but he was obviously in great pain. His hands trembled as he picked up his peanut butter sandwich.

Carter told me about the pending evacuation of Brooklyn House, which Bast was overseeing. My heart nearly broke when I thought of little Shelby, wonderful silly Felix, shy Cleo, and all the rest going off to defend the First Nome against an impossible attack, but I knew Carter was right. There was no other choice.

Carter kept hesitating, as if waiting for Walt to contribute information. Walt stayed silent. Clearly he was holding something back. Somehow or other, I'd have to get Walt alone and grill him for details.

In return, I told Carter about our visit to the House of Rest. I shared my suspicions that Amos might be calling on Set for extra power. Zia didn't contradict me, and the news didn't sit well with my brother. After several minutes of swearing and pacing the room, he finally calmed down enough to say, "We can't let that happen. He'll be destroyed."

"I know," I said. "But we can best help him by moving forward."

I didn't mention Zia's blackout in the nursing home. In Carter's present state of mind, I thought that might be too much for him. But I did tell him what Tawaret had said about the possible location of Bes's shadow.

"The ruins of Saïs…" He frowned. "I think Dad mentioned that place. He said there wasn't much left. But even if we could find the shadow, we don't have time. We've got to stop Apophis."

"I made a promise," I insisted. "Besides, we *need* Bes. Think of it as a trial run. Saving his shadow will give us a chance to practice this sort of magic before we try it on Apophis—um, in reverse, of course. It might even give us a way to revive Ra."

"But—"

"She's got a point," Walt interrupted.

I'm not sure who was more surprised—Carter, or me.

"Even if we get Setne's help," Walt said, "trapping a shadow in a statue is going to be difficult. I'd feel better if we could try it on a friendly target first. I could show you how it's done while—while I still have time."

"Walt," I said, "please, don't talk like that."

"When you face Apophis," he continued, "you'll have only one chance to get the spell right. It would be better to have some practice."

When you face Apophis. He said it so calmly, but his meaning was clear: he wouldn't be around when that happened.

Carter nudged his half-eaten pizza. "I just…I don't see how we can do it all in time. I know this is a personal mission for you, Sadie, but—"

"She has to," Zia said gently. "Carter, you once went off on a personal mission in the middle of a crisis, didn't you? That worked out." She put her hand on Carter's. "Sometimes you have to follow your heart."

Carter looked like he was trying to swallow a golf ball. Before he could say anything, the ship's bell sounded.

In the corner of the dining room, a loudspeaker crackled with Bloodstained Blade's voice: "My lords and ladies, we have reached the Hall of Judgment."

The black temple looked just as I remembered. We made our way up the steps from the dock and passed between rows of obsidian columns that marched into the gloom. Sinister-looking scenes of Underworld life glittered on the floor and in friezes circling the pillars—black designs on black stone. Despite the reed torches that burned every few meters, the air was so hazy with volcanic ash, I

couldn't see far in front of us.

As we moved deeper into the temple, voices whispered around us. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw groups of spirits drifting across the pavilion—ghostly shapes camouflaged in the smoky air. Some moved aimlessly—crying softly or tearing at their clothes in despair. Others carried armfuls of papyrus scrolls. These ghosts looked more solid and purposeful, as if they were waiting for something.

"Petitioners," Walt said. "They've brought their case files, hoping for an audience with Osiris. He was gone so long…there must be a real backlog of cases."

Walt's step seemed lighter. His eyes looked more alert, his body less weighed down by pain. He was so close to death, I'd feared this trip to the Underworld might be hard for him, but if anything he seemed more at ease than the rest of us.

"How do you know?" I asked.

Walt hesitated. "I'm not sure. It just seems…correct."

"And the ghosts without scrolls?"

"Refugees," he said. "They're hoping this place will protect them."

I didn't ask what from. I remembered the ghost at the Brooklyn Academy dance who'd been engulfed in black tendrils and dragged underground. I thought about the vision Carter had described—our mother huddled beneath a cliff somewhere in the Duat, resisting the pull of a dark force in the distance.

"We need to hurry." I started to forge ahead, but Zia grabbed my arm.

"There," she said. "Look."

The smoke parted. Twenty meters ahead stood a massive set of obsidian doors. In front of them, an animal the size of a greyhound sat on its haunches—an oversized jackal with thick black fur, fluffy pointed ears, and a face somewhere between a fox and a wolf. Its moon-colored eyes glittered in the darkness.

It snarled at us, but I wasn't put off. I may be biased, but I think jackals are cute and cuddly, even if they *were* known for digging up graves in Ancient Egypt.

"It's just Anubis," I said hopefully. "This is where we met him last time."

"That's not Anubis," Walt warned.

"Of course it is," I told him. "Watch."

"Sadie, don't," Carter said, but I walked toward the guardian.

"Hullo, Anubis," I called. "It's just me, Sadie."

The cute fuzzy jackal bared his fangs. His mouth began to froth. His adorable yellow eyes sent an unmistakable message: *One more step, and I'll chew your head off.*

I froze. "Right…that's not Anubis, unless he's having a really bad day."

"This is where we met him before," Carter said. "Why isn't he here?"

"It's one of his minions," Walt ventured. "Anubis must be…elsewhere."

Again, he sounded awfully sure, and I felt a strange pang of jealousy. Walt and Anubis seemed to have spent more time talking with each other than with me. Walt was suddenly an expert on all things deathly. Meanwhile, I couldn't even be *near* Anubis without invoking the wrath of his chaperone—

Shu, the god of hot air. It wasn't bloody fair!

Zia moved next to me, gripping her staff. "So, what now? Do we have to defeat it to pass?"

I imagined her lobbing some of her daisy-destroying fireballs. That's all we needed—a yelping, flaming jackal running through my father's courtyard.

"No," Walt said, stepping forward. "It's just a gatekeeper. It needs to know our business."

"Walt," Carter said, "if you're wrong…"

Walt raised his hands and slowly approached the jackal. "I am Walt Stone," he said. "This is Carter and Sadie Kane. And this is Zia…"

"Rashid," Zia supplied.

"We have business at the Hall of Judgment," Walt said.

The jackal snarled, but it sounded more inquisitive, not so *chew-your-head-off* hostile.

"We have testimony to offer," Walt continued. "Information relevant to the trial of Setne."

"Walt," Carter whispered, "when did you become a junior lawyer?"

I shushed him. Walt's plan seemed to be working. The jackal tilted its head as if listening, then rose and padded away into the darkness. The obsidian double doors swung open silently.

"Well done, Walt," I said. "How did you…?"

He faced me, and my heart did a somersault. Just for a moment I thought he looked like… No. Obviously my mixed-up emotions were playing with my mind. "Um, how did you know what to say?"

Walt shrugged. "I took a guess."

Just as quickly as they'd opened, the doors began to close.

"Hurry!" Carter warned. We sprinted into the courtroom of the dead.

At the start of the autumn semester—my first experience in an American school—our teacher had asked us to write down our parents' contact information and what they did for a living, in case they could help with career day. I had never heard of career day. Once I understood what it was, I couldn't stop giggling.

Could your dad come talk about his work? I imagined the headmistress asking.

*Possibly, Mrs. Laird…*I'd say. *Except he's dead, you see. Well, not completely dead. He's more of a resurrected god. He judges mortal spirits and feeds the hearts of the wicked to his pet monster. Oh, and he has blue skin. I'm sure he'd make quite an impression on career day, for all those students aspiring to grow up and become Ancient Egyptian deities.*

The Hall of Judgment had changed since my last visit. The room tended to mirror the thoughts of Osiris, so it often looked like a ghostly replica of my family's old apartment in Los Angeles, from the happier times when we all lived together.

Now, possibly because Dad was on duty, the place was fully Egyptian. The circular chamber was lined with stone pillars carved in lotus flower designs. Braziers of magic fire washed the walls in green and blue light. In the center of the room stood the scales of justice, two large golden saucers balanced from an iron T.

Kneeling before the scales was the ghost of a man in a pinstriped suit, nervously reciting from a scroll. I understood why he was tense. On either side of him stood a large reptilian demon with green

skin, a cobra head, and a wicked-looking pole arm poised over the ghost's head.

Dad sat at the far end of the room on a golden dais, with a blue-skinned Egyptian attendant at his side. Seeing my father in the Duat was always disorienting, because he appeared to be two people at once. On one level, he looked like he had in life—a handsome, muscular man with chocolate-brown skin, a bald scalp, and a neatly trimmed goatee. He wore an elegant silk suit and a dark traveling coat, like a businessman about to board a private jet.

On a deeper level of reality, however, he appeared as Osiris, god of the dead. He was dressed as a pharaoh in sandals, an embroidered linen kilt, and rows of gold and coral neckbands on his bare chest. His skin was the color of a summer sky. Across his lap lay a crook and flail—the symbols of Egyptian kingship.

As strange as it was seeing my father with blue skin and a skirt, I was so happy to be near him again, I quite forgot about the court proceedings.

"Dad!" I ran toward him.

(Carter says I was foolish, but Dad *was* the king of the court, wasn't he? Why shouldn't I be allowed to run up to say hello?)

I was halfway across when the snake demons crossed their pole arms and blocked my path.

"It's all right," Dad said, looking a bit startled. "Let her through."

I flew into his arms, knocking the crook and flail out of his lap.

He hugged me warmly, chuckling with affection. For a moment I felt like a little girl again, safe in his embrace. Then he held me at arm's length, and I could see how weary he was. He had bags under his eyes. His face was gaunt. Even the powerful blue aura of Osiris, which normally surrounded him like the corona of a star, flickered weakly.

"Sadie, my love," he said in a strained voice. "Why have you come? I'm *working*."

I tried not to feel hurt. "But, Dad, this is important!"

Carter, Walt, and Zia approached the dais. My father's expression turned grim.

"I see," he said. "First let me finish this trial. Children, stand here on my right. And please, don't interrupt."

My dad's attendant stamped his foot. "My lord, this is most irregular!"

He was an odd-looking fellow—an elderly blue Egyptian man with a huge scroll in his arms. Too solid to be a ghost, too blue to be human, he was almost as decrepit as Ra, wearing nothing but a loincloth, sandals, and an ill-fitting wig. I suppose that glossy black wedge of fake hair was meant to look manly in an Ancient Egyptian sort of way, but along with the kohl eyeliner and the rouge on his cheeks, the old boy looked like a grotesque Cleopatra impersonator.

The roll of papyrus he held was simply enormous. Years ago, I'd gone to synagogue with my friend Liz, and the Torah they kept there was *tiny* in comparison.

"It's all right, Disturber," my father told him. "We may continue now."

"But, my lord—" The old man (was his name really Disturber?) became so agitated he lost control of his scroll. The bottom dropped out and unraveled, bouncing down the steps like a papyrus carpet.

"Oh, bother, bother, bother!" Disturber struggled to reel in his document.

My father suppressed a smile. He turned back to the ghost in the pinstriped suit, who was still

kneeling at the scales. "My apologies, Robert Windham. You may finish your testimony."

The ghost bowed and scraped. "Y-yes, Lord Osiris."

He referred to his notes and began rattling off a list of crimes he wasn't guilty of—murder, theft, and selling cattle under false pretenses.

I turned to Walt and whispered, "He's a modern chap, isn't he? What's he doing in Osiris's court?"

I was a bit troubled to find that Walt once again had an answer.

"The afterlife looks different to every soul," he said, "depending on what they believe. For that guy, Egypt must've made a strong impression. Maybe he read the stories when he was young."

"And if someone doesn't believe in *any* afterlife?" I asked.

Walt gave me a sad look. "Then that's what they experience."

On the other side of the dais, the blue god Disturber hissed at us to be quiet. Why is it when adults try to silence kids, they always make more noise than the noise they're trying to stop?

The ghost of Robert Windham seemed to be winding down his testimony. "I haven't given false witness against my neighbors. Um, sorry, I can't read this last line—"

"Fish!" Disturber yelped crossly. "Have you stolen any fish from the holy lakes?"

"I lived in Kansas," the ghost said. "So…no."

My father rose from his throne. "Very well. Let his heart be weighed."

One of the snake demons produced a linen parcel the size of a child's fist.

Next to me, Carter inhaled sharply. "His *heart* is in there?"

"Shh!" Disturber said so loudly his wig almost fell off. "Bring forth the Destroyer of Souls!"

On the far wall of the chamber, a doggy door burst open. Ammit ran into the room in great excitement. The poor dear wasn't very coordinated. His miniature lion chest and forearms were sleek and agile, but his back half was a stubby and much-less-agile hippo bum. He kept sliding sideways, swerving into pillars, and knocking over braziers. Each time he crashed, he shook his lion's mane and crocodile snout and yipped happily.

(Carter is scolding me, as always. He says Ammit is female. I'll admit I can't prove it either way, but I've always thought of Ammit as a boy monster. He's much too hyper to be otherwise, and the way he marks his territory…but never mind.)

"There's my baby!" I cried, quite carried away. "There's my Poochiekins!"

Ammit ran at me and leaped into my arms, nuzzling me with his rough snout.

"My lord Osiris!" Disturber lost the bottom of his scroll again, which unraveled around his legs. "This is an outrage!"

"Sadie," Dad said firmly, "please do not refer to the Devourer of Souls as Poochiekins."

"Sorry," I muttered, and let Ammit down.

One of the snake demons set Robert Windham's heart on the scales of justice. I'd seen many pictures of Anubis performing this duty, and I wished he were here now. Anubis would've been *much* more interesting to watch than some snake demon.

On the opposite scale, the Feather of Truth appeared. (Don't get me started on the Feather of Truth.)

The scales wavered. The two saucers stopped, just about even. The pinstriped ghost sobbed with relief. Ammit whimpered disappointedly.

"Most impressive," my father said. "Robert Windham, you have been found sufficiently virtuous, despite the fact you were an investment banker."

"Red Cross donations, baby!" the ghost yelled.

"Yes, well," Dad said dryly, "you may proceed to the afterlife."

A door opened to the left of the dais. The snake demons hauled Robert Windham to his feet.

"Thank you!" he yelled, as the demons escorted him out. "And if you need any financial advice, Lord Osiris, I still believe in the long term viability of the market—"

The door shut behind him.

Disturber sniffed indignantly. "Horrible man."

My father shrugged. "A modern soul who appreciated the ancient ways of Egypt. He couldn't have been all bad." Dad turned to us. "Children, this is Disturber, one of my advisors and gods of judgment."

"Sorry?" I pretended not to have heard. "Did you say he's *disturbed*?"

"Disturber is my name!" the god shouted angrily. "I judge those who are guilty of losing their temper!"

"Yes." Despite my father's weariness, his eyes sparkled with amusement. "That was Disturber's traditional duty, although now that he's my last minister, he helps me with all my cases. There used to be forty-two judgment gods for different crimes, you see, but—"

"Like Hot Foot and Fire-embracer," Zia said.

Disturber gasped. "How do you know of them?"

"We saw them," Zia said. "In the Fourth House of the Night."

"You—saw—" Disturber almost dropped his scroll altogether. "Lord Osiris, we must save them immediately! My brethren—"

"We will discuss it," Dad promised. "First, I want to hear what brings my children to the Duat."

We took turns explaining: the rebel magicians and their secret alliance with Apophis, their impending attack on the First Nome, and our hope to find a new sort of execration spell that might stop Apophis for good.

Some of our news surprised and troubled our father—like the fact that many magicians had fled the First Nome, leaving it so poorly defended that we'd sent our initiates from Brooklyn House to help, and that Amos was flirting with the powers of Set.

"No," Dad said. "No, he can't! These magicians who've abandoned him—inexcusable! The House of Life must rally to the Chief Lector." He began to rise. "I should go to my brother—"

"My lord," Disturber said, "you are not a magician anymore. You are Osiris."

Dad grimaced, but he eased back into his throne. "Yes. Yes, of course. Please, children, continue."

Some of our news Dad already knew. His shoulders slumped when we mentioned the spirits of the dead who were disappearing, and the vision of our mum lost somewhere in the deep Duat, fighting against the pull of a dark force that Carter and I were certain was the shadow of Apophis.

"I have searched for your mother everywhere," Dad said despondently. "This force that is taking the spirits—whether it's the serpent's shadow or something else—I cannot stop it. I can't even *find* it. Your mother…"

His expression turned brittle as ice. I understood what he was feeling. For years he had lived with guilt because he couldn't prevent our mum's death. Now she was in danger again, and even though he was the lord of the dead, he felt helpless to save her.

"We can find her," I promised. "All of this is connected, Dad. We have a plan."

Carter and I explained about the *sheut*, and how it might be used for a king-sized execration spell.

My father sat forward. His eyes narrowed. "Anubis *told* you this? He revealed the nature of the *sheut* to a mortal?"

His blue aura flickered dangerously. I'd never been scared of my dad, but I'll admit I took a step back. "Well…it wasn't just Anubis."

"Thoth helped," Carter said. "And some of it we guessed—"

"Thoth!" my father spat. "This is dangerous knowledge, children. Much too dangerous. I won't have you—"

"Dad!" I shouted. I think I surprised him, but my patience had finally snapped. I'd had quite enough of gods telling me what I *shouldn't* or *couldn't* do. "Apophis's shadow is what's drawing the souls of the dead. It has to be! It's feeding on them, getting stronger as Apophis prepares to rise."

I hadn't really processed that idea before, but as I spoke the words, they felt like the truth—horrifying, but the truth.

"We've got to find the shadow and capture it," I insisted. "Then we can use it to banish the serpent. It's our only chance—unless you want us to use a *standard* execration. We've got the statue ready to go for that, don't we, Carter?"

Carter patted his backpack. "The spell will kill us," he said. "And it probably won't work. But if that's our only option…"

Zia looked horrified. "Carter, you didn't tell me! You made a statue of—of *him*? You'd sacrifice yourself to—"

"No," our father said. The anger drained out of him. He slumped forward and put his face in his hands. "No, you're right, Sadie. A small chance is better than none. I just couldn't bear it if you…" He sat up and took a breath, trying to regain his composure. "How can I help? I assume you came here for a reason, but you're asking for magic I don't possess."

"Yes, well," I said, "that's the tricky part."

Before I could say more, the sound of a gong reverberated through the chamber. The main doors began to open.

"My lord," Disturber said, "the next trial begins."

"Not now!" my father snapped. "Can't it be delayed?"

"No, my lord." The blue god lowered his voice. "This is *his* trial. You know…"

"Oh, by the twelve gates of the night," Dad cursed. "Children, this trial is very serious."

"Yes," I said. "Actually, that's what—"

"We'll talk afterward," Dad cut me off. "And please, whatever you do, don't speak to the accused or make eye contact with him. This spirit is particularly—"

The gong sounded again. A troop of demons marched in, surrounding the accused. I didn't have to ask who he was.

Setne had arrived.

The guards were intimidating enough—six red-skinned warriors with guillotine blades for heads.

Even without them, I could tell Setne was dangerous from all the magical precautions. Glowing hieroglyphs spiraled around him like the rings of Saturn—a collection of anti-magic symbols like: *Suppress*, *Dampen*, *Stay*, *Shut up*, *Powerless*, and *Don't even think about it*.

Setne's wrists were bound together with pink strips of cloth. Two more pink bands were tied around his waist. One was fastened around his neck, and two more connected his ankles so he shuffled as he walked. To the casual observer, the pink ribbons might've looked like the Hello Kitty incarceration play set, but I knew from personal experience that they were some of the most powerful magic bonds in the world.

"The Seven Ribbons of Hathor," Walt whispered. "I wish I could make some of those."

"I've got some," Zia murmured. "But the recharge time is *really* long. Mine won't be ready until December."

Walt looked at her in awe.

The guillotine demons fanned out on either side of the accused.

Setne himself didn't look like trouble, certainly not someone worthy of so much security. He was quite small—not *Bes* small, mind you, but still a diminutive man. His arms and legs were scrawny. His chest was a xylophone of ribs. Yet he stuck out his chin and smiled confidently as if he owned the world—which isn't easy when one is wearing only a loincloth and some pink ribbons.

Without a doubt, his face was the same one I'd seen in the wall at the Dallas Museum, and again in the Hall of Ages. He'd been the priest who sacrificed that bull in the shimmering vision from the New Kingdom.

He had the same hawkish nose, heavy-lidded eyes, and thin cruel lips. Most priests from ancient times were bald, but Setne's hair was dark and thick, slicked back with oil like a 1950s tough boy. If I'd seen him in Piccadilly Circus (with more clothes on, hopefully) I would've steered clear, assuming he was handing out advertisements or trying to sell scalped tickets to a West End show. Sleazy and annoying? Yes. Dangerous? Not really.

The guillotine demons pushed him to his knees. Setne seemed to find that amusing. His eyes flickered over the room, registering each one of us. I tried not to make eye contact, but it was difficult. Setne recognized me and winked. Somehow I knew that he could read my jumbled emotions quite well, and that he found them funny.

He inclined his head toward the throne. "Lord Osiris, all this fuss for me? You shouldn't have."

My father didn't answer. With a grim expression, he gestured at Disturber, who shuffled through his scroll until he found the proper spot.

"Setne, also known as Prince Khaemwaset—"

"Oh, wow…" Setne grinned at me, and I fought the urge to smile back. "Haven't heard *that* name

in a while. That's ancient history, right there!"

Disturber huffed. "You stand accused of heinous crimes! You have blasphemed against the gods four thousand and ninety-two times."

"Ninety-one," Setne corrected. "That crack about Lord Horus—that was just a misunderstanding." He winked at Carter. "Am I right, pal?"

How in the world did he know about Carter and Horus?

Disturber shuffled his scroll. "You have used magic for evil purposes, including twenty-three murders—"

"Self-defense!" Setne tried to spread his hands, but the ribbons restrained him.

"—including one incident where you were *paid* to kill with magic," Disturber said.

Setne shrugged. "That was self-defense for my employer."

"You plotted against three separate pharaohs," Disturber continued. "You tried to overthrow the House of Life on six occasions. Most grievous of all, you robbed the tombs of the dead to steal books of magic."

Setne laughed easily. He glanced at me as if to say, *Can you believe this guy?*

"Look, Disturber," he said, "that *is* your name, right? A handsome, intelligent judgment god like you—you've got to be overworked and underappreciated. I feel for you, I really do. You've got better things to do than dig up my old history. Besides, all these charges—I answered them already in my previous trials."

"Oh." Disturber looked confused. He adjusted his wig self-consciously and turned to my dad. "Should we let him go, then, my lord?"

"No, Disturber." Dad sat forward. "The prisoner is using divine words to influence your mind, warping the most sacred magic of Ma'at. Even in his bindings, he is dangerous."

Setne examined his fingernails. "Lord Osiris, I'm flattered, but honestly, these charges—"

"Silence!" Dad thrust his hand toward the prisoner. The swirling hieroglyphs glowed brighter around him. The Ribbons of Hathor tightened.

Setne began to choke. His smug expression melted, replaced by absolute hatred. I could feel his anger. He wanted to kill my father, kill us all.

"Dad!" I said. "Please, don't!"

My father frowned at me, clearly unhappy with the interruption. He snapped his fingers, and Setne's bonds eased. The ghost magician coughed and retched.

"Khaemwaset, son of Ramses," my father said calmly, "you have been sentenced to oblivion more than once. The first time you managed to plead for a reduced sentence, volunteering to serve the pharaoh with your magic—"

"Yes," Setne croaked. He tried to recover his poise, but his smile was twisted with pain. "I'm skilled labor, my lord. It would be a crime to destroy me."

"Yet you escaped en route," my father said. "You killed your guards and spent the next three hundred years sowing Chaos across Egypt."

Setne shrugged. "It wasn't *that* bad. Just a bit of fun."

"You were captured and sentenced again," my father continued, "three more times. In each

instance, you connived your way to freedom. And since the gods have been absent from the world, you've run amok, doing as you pleased, committing crimes and terrorizing mortals."

"My lord, that's unfair," Setne protested. "First of all, I *missed* you gods. Honestly, it was a dull few millennia without you. As for these so-called crimes, well, some people might say the French Revolution was a first-class party! I know *I* enjoyed myself. And Archduke Ferdinand? A total bore. If you knew him, you would've assassinated him too."

"Enough!" Dad said. "You are done. I am the host of Osiris now. I will not tolerate the existence of a villain like you, even as a spirit. This time you are out of tricks."

Ammit yipped excitedly. The guillotine guards chopped their blades up and down as if they were clapping. Disturber cried, "Hear, hear!"

As for Setne…he threw back his head and laughed.

My father looked stunned, then outraged. He raised his hand to tighten the Ribbons of Hathor, but Setne said, "Wait, my lord. Here's the thing. I'm *not* out of tricks. Ask your children over there. Ask their friends. Those kids need my help."

"No more lies," my father growled. "Your heart shall be weighed, *again*, and Ammit will devour—"

"Dad!" I shrieked. "He's right! We *do* need him."

My father turned toward me. I could practically see the grief and rage roiling inside him. He'd lost his wife again. He was powerless to assist his brother. A battle for the end of the world was about to begin, and his children were on the front line. Dad *needed* to serve justice on this ghost magician. He needed to feel that he could do something right.

"Dad, please, listen," I said. "I know it's dangerous. I know you'll hate this. But we came here because of Setne. What we told you earlier about our plan—Setne's got the knowledge we need."

"Sadie's right," Carter said. "Please, Dad. You asked how you could help. Give us custody of Setne. He's the key to defeating Apophis."

At the sound of that name, a cold wind blew through the courtroom. The braziers sputtered. Ammit whimpered and put his paws over his snout. Even the guillotine demons shuffled nervously.

"No," Dad said. "Absolutely not. Setne is influencing you with his magic. He is a servant of Chaos."

"My lord," Setne said, his tone suddenly soft and respectful, "I'm a lot of things, but a servant of the snake? No. I don't want the world destroyed. There's nothing in that for me. Listen to the girl. Let her tell you her plan."

The words worked their way into my mind. I realized Setne was using magic, commanding me to speak. I steeled myself against the urge. Sadly, Setne was ordering me to do something I loved—talk. It all came spilling out: How we'd tried to save the Book of Overcoming Apophis in Dallas, how Setne had spoken with me there, how we'd found the shadow box and struck on the idea of using the *sheut*. I explained my hopes to revive Bes and destroy Apophis.

"It's impossible," Dad said. "Even if it wasn't, Setne can't be trusted. I would never release him, especially not to my children. He'd kill you at the first opportunity!"

"Dad," Carter said, "we're not children anymore. We can do this."

The agony in my father's face was hard to bear. I forced back my tears and approached the

throne.

"Dad, I know you love us." I gripped his hand. "I know you want to protect us, but you risked everything to give us a chance at saving the world. Now it's time we did that. This is the only way."

"She's right." Setne managed to sound regretful, as if he were sorry he might get a reprieve. "Also, my lord, it's the only way to save the spirits of the dead before the shadow of Apophis destroys them all—including your wife."

My father's face turned from sky blue to deep indigo. He gripped the throne like he wanted to tear off the armrests.

I thought Setne had gone too far.

Then my father's hands relaxed. The anger in his eyes changed to desperation and hunger.

"Guards," he said, "give the prisoner the Feather of Truth. He will hold it while he explains himself. If he lies, he will perish in flames."

One of the guillotine demons plucked the feather from the scales of justice. Setne looked unconcerned as the glowing plume was placed in his hands.

"Right!" he began. "So your kids are correct. I did create a shadow execration spell. In theory, it could be used to destroy a god—or even Apophis. I never tried. Unfortunately, it can only be cast by a living magician. I died before I could test it. Not that I wanted to kill any gods, my lord. I was just thinking I'd use it to blackmail them into doing my bidding."

"Blackmail…the gods," Dad growled.

Setne smiled guiltily. "This was back in my misguided youth. Anyway, I recorded the formula in several copies of the Book of Overcoming Apophis."

Walt grunted. "Which have all been destroyed."

"Okay," Setne said, "but my original notes would still be in the margins of the Book of Thoth that I…that I stole. See? Being honest. I guarantee you even Apophis hasn't found that book. I hid it too well. I can show you where it is. The book will explain how to find the shadow of Apophis, how to capture it, and how to cast the execration."

"Can't you just tell us how?" Carter asked.

Setne pouted. "Young master, I'd *love* to. But I don't have the whole book memorized. And it's been millennia since I wrote that spell. If I told you one wrong word in the incantation, well…we wouldn't want any mistakes. But I can lead you to the book. Once we get it—"

"We?" Zia asked. "Why can't you just give us directions to the book? Why do you need to come along?"

The ghost grinned. "Because, doll, I'm the only one who can retrieve it. Traps, curses…you know. Besides, you'll need my help deciphering the notes. The spell is complicated! But don't worry. All you gotta do is keep these Ribbons of Hathor on me. It's Zia, right? You've got experience using them."

"How did you know—?"

"If I cause you any trouble," Setne continued, "you can tie me up good like a Harvest Day present. But I won't try to escape—at least not until I lead you to the Book of Thoth and then get you safely to the shadow of Apophis. Nobody knows the deepest levels of the Duat like I do. I'm your best hope for a guide."

The Feather of Truth didn't react. Setne didn't go up in flames, so I guessed he wasn't lying.

"Four of us," Carter said. "One of him."

"Except he killed his guards last time," Walt pointed out.

"So we'll be more careful," Carter said. "All of us together should be able to keep him under control."

Setne winced. "Oh, except…see, Sadie's got her little side task, doesn't she? She's gotta find the shadow of Bes. And actually, it's a good idea."

I blinked. "It is?"

"Absolutely, doll," Setne said. "We don't have much time. More specifically, your friend Walt there doesn't have much time."

I wanted to kill the ghost, except he was already dead. I suddenly hated that smug smile.

I gritted my teeth. "Go on."

"Walt Stone—sorry, pal, but you won't survive long enough to get the Book of Thoth, travel to the shadow of Apophis, and use the spell. There just isn't time left on your clock. But getting Bes's shadow—that won't take as long. It'll be a good test of the magic. If it works, great! If it doesn't… well, we've only lost one dwarf god."

I wanted to stomp his face, but he gestured for patience.

"What I'm thinking," he said, "is we split up. Carter and Zia, you two go with me to get the Book of Thoth. Meanwhile, Sadie takes Walt to the ruins of Saïs to find the dwarf's shadow. I'll give you some notes on how to capture it, but the spell is just theory. In practice, you'll need Walt's charm-making skill to pull it off. He'll have to improvise if anything goes wrong. If Walt succeeds, then Sadie will know how to capture a shadow. If Walt dies afterward—and I'm sorry, but casting a spell like that will probably do him in—then Sadie can rendezvous with us in the Duat, and we'll hunt down the snake's shadow. Everybody wins!"

I wasn't sure whether to weep or scream. I only managed to keep my calm because I sensed that Setne would find any reaction extremely funny.

He faced my father. "What do you say, Lord Osiris? It's a chance to get your wife back, defeat Apophis, restore Bes's soul, save the world! All I ask is that when I come back, the court take my good deeds into consideration when you sentence me. How fair is that, huh?"

The chamber was silent except for the crackling fires in the braziers.

Finally Disturber seemed to shake himself out of a trance. "My lord…what is your ruling?"

Dad looked at me. I could tell he hated this plan. But Setne had tempted him with the one thing he couldn't pass up: a chance to save our mum. The vile ghost had promised me one last day alone with Walt, which I wanted more than anything, and a chance to save Bes, which was a close second. He'd put Carter and Zia together and promised them a chance to save the world.

He'd put hooks in all of us and reeled us in like fish from a sacred lake. But despite the fact that I knew we were being played, I couldn't find a reason to say no.

"We have to, Dad," I said.

He lowered his head. "Yes, we do. May Ma'at protect us all."

"Oh, we'll have fun!" Setne said cheerfully. "Shall we get going? Doomsday isn't gonna wait!"

CARTER

11. Don’t Worry, Be Hapi

TYPICAL.

Sadie and Walt go off looking for a friendly shadow, while Zia and I escort a psychotic murderous ghost to his heavily trapped stash of forbidden magic. Gee, who got the better end of that deal?

The *Egyptian Queen* burst out of the Underworld and into the Nile like a breaching whale. Its paddle wheel churned through the blue water. Its smokestacks billowed golden smoke into the desert air. After the gloom of the Duat, the sunlight was blinding. Once my eyes adjusted, I saw we were chugging downriver, heading north, so we must have surfaced somewhere to the south of Memphis.

On either side, marshy green riverbanks columned with palm trees stretched into the humid haze. A few houses dotted the landscape. A battered pickup truck rumbled down the riverfront road. A sailboat glided by on our port side. No one paid us any attention.

I wasn’t sure exactly where we were. It could’ve been anywhere along the Nile. But judging from the position of the sun, it was already late morning. We’d eaten and slept in my father’s realm, figuring we wouldn’t be able to close our eyes once we had custody of Setne. It hadn’t felt like much of a rest, but obviously we’d spent more time down under than I realized. The day was slipping by. Tomorrow at dawn, the rebels would attack the First Nome, and Apophis would rise.

Zia stood next to me at the bow. She’d showered and changed into a spare set of combat clothes—a camo tank top, olive cargo pants tucked into her boots. Maybe that doesn’t sound glamorous, but in the morning sunlight she was beautiful. Best of all, she was here in person—not a reflection in the scrying bowl, not a *shabti*. When the wind changed directions I caught the scent of her lemon shampoo. Our forearms touched as we leaned against the rail, but she didn’t seem to mind. Her skin was feverishly warm.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

She had trouble focusing on me. Up close, the flecks of green and black in her amber eyes were sort of hypnotizing. “I was thinking about Ra,” she said. “Wondering who’s taking care of him today.”

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

But I felt a little disappointed. Personally, I was thinking about the moment when Zia had taken my hand in the dining room last night: *Sometimes you have to follow your heart.* This might be our last day on earth. If it was, I should really tell Zia how I felt about her. I mean, I thought she knew, but I didn’t *know* that she knew, so…Oh, man. Headache.

I started to say, “Zia—”

Setne materialized next to us. “All better!”

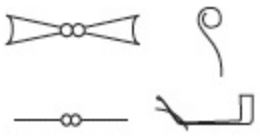
In the daylight, he looked almost like flesh-and-blood, but when he turned in a circle, showing off his new clothes, his face and hands flickered holographically. I'd given him permission to put on something besides the loincloth. In fact, I'd insisted. But I hadn't expected an outfit so mind-boggling.

Maybe he was trying to live up to Sadie's nickname for him: Uncle Vinnie. He wore a black suit jacket with padded shoulders, a red T-shirt, a crisp pair of jeans, and blindingly white running shoes. Around his neck was a heavy gold chain of interlocking *ankh*s. On each pinky he wore a ring the size of a jawbreaker, with the symbol of power—*was*—set in diamonds. His hair was combed back with even more grease. His eyes were lined with kohl. He looked like the Ancient Egyptian Mafia.

Then I noticed something missing from his ensemble. He didn't seem to be wearing the Ribbons of Hathor.

I'll admit: I panicked. I yelled the command word Zia had taught me: *"Tas!"*

The symbol for *Bind* flared in Setne's face:



The Ribbons of Hathor reappeared around his neck, wrists, ankles, chest, and waist. They expanded aggressively, cocooning Setne in a pink tornado until he was wrapped tight as a mummy, with nothing showing but his eyes.

"Mm!" he protested.

I took a deep breath. Then I snapped my fingers. The bindings shrank back to their normal size.

"What was *that* for?" Setne demanded.

"I didn't see the ribbons."

"You didn't…" Setne laughed. "Carter, Carter, Carter. Come on, pal. That's just an illusion—a cosmetic change. I can't *really* get out of these things."

He held out his wrists. The ribbons vanished, then reappeared. "See? I'm just concealing them, 'cause pink doesn't go with my outfit."

Zia snorted. "Nothing goes with that outfit."

Setne shot her an irritated look. "No need to get personal, doll. Just relax, okay? You saw what happens—one word from you, and I'm tied up good. No problems."

His tone sounded so reasonable. Setne was no problem. Setne would cooperate. I could just relax.

In the back of my mind, the voice of Horus said, *Careful*.

I raised my mental guard. Suddenly I was aware of hieroglyphs floating in the air around me—half-visible wisps of smoke. I willed them to disappear, and they fizzled like gnats in a bug zapper. "Stop it with the magic words, Setne. I'll relax when our business is done and you're back in my dad's custody. Now, where are we going?"

A moment of surprise passed over Setne's face. He hid it with a smile. "Sure, no problem. Glad to see that *path of the gods* magic is working out for you. How you doing in there, Horus?"

Zia snarled impatiently. "Just answer the question, you maggot, before I burn that smile off your face."

She thrust out her hand. Flames wreathed her fingers.

"Zia, whoa," I said.

I'd seen her get angry before, but the *burn-your-smile-off* tactic seemed a little harsh even for her.

Setne didn't seem concerned. From his jacket, he pulled a strange white comb—were those human finger bones?—and brushed his greasy hair.

"Poor Zia," he said. "The old man is getting to you, isn't he? Having any trouble with, ah, temperature control yet? I've seen a few people in your situation spontaneously combust. Not pretty."

His words obviously rattled Zia. Her eyes seethed with loathing, but she closed her fist and extinguished the flames. "You vile, despicable—"

"Take it easy, doll," Setne said. "I'm just expressing concern. As for where we're going—south of Cairo, the ruins of Memphis."

I wondered what he'd meant about Zia. I decided this wasn't the time to ask. I didn't want Zia's flaming fingers in *my* face.

I tried to recall what I knew about Memphis. I remembered it was one of the old capitals of Egypt, but it had been destroyed centuries ago. Most of the ruins were buried under modern Cairo. Some were scattered in the desert to the south. My dad had probably taken me to excavation sites in that area once or twice, but I didn't have any clear recollection. After a few years, all the dig sites sort of blended together.

"Where exactly?" I demanded. "Memphis was a big place."

Setne wiggled his eyebrows. "You got that right. Man, the times I used to have in Gamblers' Alley…but never mind. The less you know, pal, the better. We don't want our snaky Chaos friend gleaning information from your mind, do we? Speaking of which, it's a miracle he hasn't already seen your plans and sent some nasty monster to stop you. You seriously need to work on your mental defenses. Reading your mind is *way* too easy. As for your girlfriend here…"

He leaned toward me with a grin. "Would you like to know what *she's* thinking?"

Zia understood the Ribbons of Hathor better than I did. Instantly, the band around Setne's neck tightened and became a lovely pink collar with a leash. Setne gagged and clawed at his throat. Zia grabbed the other end of the lead.

"Setne, you are I are going to the wheelhouse," she announced. "You will give the captain *exact* information about where we're going, or you'll never breathe again. Understood?"

She didn't wait for a response. He couldn't have given one anyway. She dragged him across the deck and up the stairs like a very bad dog.

As soon as they'd disappeared into the pilot's house, someone next to me chuckled. "Remind me not to get on *her* bad side."

Horus's instincts kicked in. Before I knew what was happening, I'd summoned my *khopesh* from the Duat and was resting the curved edge against my visitor's throat.

"Really?" said the god of Chaos. "This is how you greet an old friend?"

Set leaned casually against the rail in a black three-piece suit and a matching porkpie hat. The outfit was striking against his bloodred skin. The last time I'd seen him, he'd been bald. Now he had braided cornrows decorated with rubies. His black eyes glittered behind small round glasses. With a

chill, I realized he was impersonating Amos.

"Stop that." I pressed my blade against his throat. "Stop mocking my uncle!"

Set looked offended. "Mocking? My dear boy, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery! Now, please, can we talk like civilized semi-divine beings?"

With one finger he pushed the *khopesh* away from his neck. I lowered my blade. Now that I was over my initial shock, I had to admit I was curious about what he wanted.

"Why are you here?" I demanded.

"Oh, pick a reason. The world ends tomorrow. Perhaps I wanted to say good-bye." He grinned and waved. "Bye! Or perhaps I wanted to explain. Or give you a warning."

I glanced toward the wheelhouse. I couldn't see Zia. No alarm bells were ringing. No one else seemed to have noticed that the god of evil had just materialized on our boat.

Set followed my gaze. "How about that Setne, huh? I love that guy."

"You would," I muttered. "Was he named after you?"

"Nah. *Setne* is just his nickname. His real name is Khaemwaset, so you can see why he likes Setne better. I hope he doesn't kill you right away. He's a lot of fun…until he kills you."

"Is that what you wanted to explain?"

Set adjusted his glasses. "No, no. It's the thing with Amos. You've got the wrong idea."

"You mean that you possessed him and tried to destroy him?" I asked. "That you almost shattered his mind? And that now you want to do it again?"

"The first two—true. The last one—no. Amos called *me*, kid. You gotta understand, I could never have invaded his mind in the first place if he didn't share some of my qualities. He *understands* me."

I clenched my sword. "I understand you, too. You're evil."

Set laughed. "You figure that out all by yourself? The god of evil is evil? Sure I am, but not *pure* evil. Not *pure* Chaos, either. After I spent some time in Amos's head, he understood. I'm like that improvisational jazz he loves—chaos within order. That's our connection. And I'm still a god, Carter. I'm…what do you call it? The *loyal opposition*."

"Loyal. Yeah, right."

Set gave me a sly smile. "Okay, I want to rule the world. Destroy anyone who gets in my way? Of course. But that snake Apophis—he takes things too far. He to wants pull the whole of creation down into a big soupy primordial mess. Where's the fun in that? If it comes down to Ra or Apophis, I fight on Ra's side. That's why Amos and I have a deal. He's learning the path of Set. I'm going to help him."

My arms trembled. I wanted to cut Set's head off, but I wasn't sure I had the strength. I also wasn't sure it would hurt him. I knew from Horus that gods tended to laugh off simple injuries like decapitation.

"You expect me to believe you'll cooperate with Amos?" I asked. "Without trying to overpower him?"

"Sure, I'll *try*. But you should have more faith in your uncle. He's stronger than you think. Who do you think sent me here to explain?"

An electric charge went through my body. I wanted to believe Amos had everything under control, but this was *Set* talking. He did remind me a lot of the ghost magician Setne—and that wasn't a good thing.

"You've done your explaining," I said. "Now you can leave."

Set shrugged. "Okay, but it does seem like there was one more thing…" He tapped his chin. "Oh, right. The warning."

"The warning?" I repeated.

"Because usually when Horus and I fight, it would be *me* who was responsible for what's about to kill you. But this time, it's not. I thought you should know. Apophis is *so* copying my moves, but like I said…" He took off his porkpie hat and bowed, the rubies glittering in his cornrows. "Imitation is flattery."

"What are you—?"

The riverboat lurched and groaned as if we'd hit a sandbar. Up in the wheelhouse, the alarm bell *ding*ed. The glowing crew orbs zipped around the deck in a panic.

"What's happening?" I grabbed the rail.

"Oh, that'd be the giant hippo," Set said casually. "Good luck!"

He disappeared in a cloud of red smoke as a monstrous shape rose from the Nile.

You might not think a hippo could inspire terror. Screaming "Hippo!" doesn't have the same impact as screaming "Shark!" But I'm telling you—as the *Egyptian Queen* careened to one side, its paddle wheel lifting completely out of the water, and I saw that monster emerge from the deep, I nearly discovered the hieroglyphs for *accident in my pants*.

The creature was easily as big as our riverboat. Its skin glistened purple and gray. As it rose near the bow, it fixed its eyes on me with unmistakable malice and opened a maw the size of an airplane hangar. Its bottom peglike teeth were taller than me. Looking down the creature's throat, I felt like I was seeing a bright pink tunnel straight to the Underworld. The monster could have eaten me right there, along with the front half of the boat. I would have been too paralyzed to react.

Instead, the hippo bellowed. Imagine someone revving a dirt bike, then blowing a trumpet. Now imagine those sounds amplified twenty times, coming at you in a blast of breath that smells of rotten fish and pond scum. That's what a giant hippo's war cry is like.

Somewhere behind me, Zia yelled, "Hippo!" Which I thought was a little late.

She stumbled toward me over the rocking deck, the tip of her staff on fire. Our ghostly pal Setne floated behind her, grinning with delight.

"There it is!" Setne shook his diamond pinky rings. "Told ya Apophis would send a monster to kill you."

"You're so smart!" I shouted. "Now, how do we stop it?"

"BRRRAAHHHHH!" The hippo shoved its face against the *Egyptian Queen*. I tumbled backward and slammed against the deckhouse.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Zia blast a column of fire at the creature's face. The flames went straight up its left nostril, which just made the hippo mad. It snorted smoke and bashed the ship harder, catapulting Zia into the river.

"No!" I staggered to my feet. I tried to summon the avatar of Horus, but my head was throbbing. My focus was shot.

"Want some advice?" Setne wafted next to me, unaffected by the rocking of the ship. "I could give you a spell to use."

His evil smile didn't exactly fill me with confidence.

"Just stay put!" I pointed at his hands and yelled, "*Tas!*"

The Ribbons of Hathor tied his wrists together.

"Oh, come on!" he complained. "How am I supposed to comb my hair like this?"

The hippo peered at me over the rail—its eye like a greasy black dinner plate. Up in the wheelhouse, Bloodstained Blade rang the alarm bell and shouted at the crew, "Hard to port! Hard to port!"

Somewhere over the side, I heard Zia choking and splashing, which at least meant she was alive, but I had to keep the hippo away from her and give the *Egyptian Queen* time to disengage. I grabbed my sword, charged up the tilting deck, and leaped straight onto the monster's head.

My first discovery: hippos are slippery. I scrambled for a handhold—not easy while wielding a sword—and almost slid off the other side of the hippo's head before I hooked my free arm around its ear.

The hippo roared and shook me like a dangle earring. I caught a glimpse of a fishing boat sailing calmly by as if nothing were wrong. The crew orbs of the *Egyptian Queen* zipped around a large crack in the stern. Just for a moment, I saw Zia floundering in the water, about twenty yards downstream. Then her head went under. I summoned all my strength and drove my sword into the hippo's ear.

"BRRRAAHHHHH!" The monster thrashed its head. I lost my grip and went sailing across the river like a three-point shot.

I would've hit the water hard, but at the last second I changed into a falcon.

I know…that sounds crazy. *Oh, by the way, I just happened to change into a falcon.* But it was fairly easy magic for me, since the falcon was Horus's sacred animal. Suddenly, instead of falling, I was soaring over the Nile. My vision was so sharp I could see field mice in the marshes. I could see Zia struggling in the water, as well as every bristle on the hippo's massive snout.

I dove at the monster's eye, raking it with my claws. Unfortunately it was heavily lidded and covered with some kind of membrane. The hippo blinked and bellowed in annoyance, but I could tell that I hadn't done any real damage.

The monster snapped at me. I was much too fast. I flew to the ship and perched on the wheelhouse roof, trying to catch my breath. The *Egyptian Queen* had managed to turn. It was slowly putting distance between itself and the monster, but the hull had taken serious damage. Smoke billowed from the cracks in the stern. We were listing to starboard, and Bloodstained Blade kept ringing his alarm bell, which was really annoying.

Zia was working to stay afloat, but she'd drifted farther downstream from the hippo and didn't seem to be in immediate danger. She tried to summon fire—which isn't easy to do when you're floundering in a river.

The hippo lumbered back and forth, apparently looking for the pesky bird that had poked it in the

eye. The monster's ear was still bleeding, though my sword was no longer there—maybe at the bottom of the river somewhere. Finally the hippo turned its attention to the ship.

Setne materialized next to me. His arms were still tied, but he looked like he was enjoying himself. "You ready for that advice now, pal? I can't cast the spell myself 'cause I'm dead and all, but I can tell you what to say."

The hippo charged. It was less than fifty yards away, closing fast. If it hit the ship at that speed, the *Egyptian Queen* would break into kindling.

Time seemed to slow down. I tried to gather my focus. Emotions are bad for magic, and I was completely panicked; but I knew I'd only get one shot at this. I spread my wings and flew straight at the hippo. Halfway there, I transformed back into a human, dropped like a stone, and summoned the avatar of Horus.

If it hadn't worked, I would've ended my life as an insignificant grease spot on the chest of a charging hippo.

Thankfully, the blue aura flickered around me. I landed in the river encased in the glowing body of a twenty-foot-tall hawk-headed warrior. Compared to the hippo, I was still tiny, but I got its attention when I drove my fist into its snout.

That worked really well for about two seconds. The monster forgot all about the ship. I sidestepped and made it turn toward me, but I was way too slow. Wading through the river in avatar form was about as easy as running through a room full of bouncy balls.

The monster lunged. It twisted its head and clamped its mouth around my waist. I staggered, trying to break free, but its jaws were like a vise grip. Its teeth sank into the magical shielding. I didn't have my sword. All I could do was pummel its head with my glowing blue fists, but my power was fading rapidly.

"Carter!" Zia screamed.

I had maybe ten seconds to live. Then the avatar would collapse, and I'd be swallowed or bitten in half.

"Setne!" I yelled. "What's that spell?"

"Oh, *now* you want the spell," Setne called from the ship. "Repeat after me: *Hapi, u-ha ey pwah*."

I didn't know what that meant. Setne might've been tricking me into self-destructing or transforming into a chunk of Swiss cheese. But I was out of options. I shouted: *"Hapi, u-ha ey pwah!"*

Blue hieroglyphs—brighter than I'd ever summoned—blazed above the hippo's head:

Seeing them written out, I suddenly understood their meaning: *Hapi, arise and attack.* But what did *that* mean?

At least they distracted the hippo. It let go of me and snapped at the hieroglyphs. My avatar failed. I plunged into the water, my magic exhausted, my defenses gone—just tiny little Carter Kane in the shadow of a sixteen-ton hippo.

The monster swallowed the hieroglyphs and snorted. It shook its head as if it had just gulped down a chili pepper.

Great, I thought. *Setne's awesome magic summoned an appetizer for the devil hippo.*

Then, from the boat, Setne yelled, "Wait for it! Three, two, one…"

The Nile boiled around me. A huge mass of brown seaweed erupted beneath me and lifted me skyward. Instinctively I held on, slowly realizing that the seaweed wasn't seaweed. It was *hair* on top of a colossal head. The giant man rose from the Nile, higher and higher, until the hippo looked almost cute in comparison. I couldn't tell much about the giant from the top of his head, but his skin was darker blue than my father's. He had shaggy brown hair full of river muck. His belly was hugely swollen, and he seemed to be wearing nothing but a loincloth made of fish scales.

"BRRRAAHHHHH!" The hippo lunged, but the blue giant grabbed its bottom teeth and stopped it cold. The force of the impact nearly shook me off his head.

"Yay!" the blue giant bellowed. "Hippo toss! I love this game!" He swung his arms in a golf swing motion and launched the monster out of the water.

Few things are stranger than watching a giant hippo fly. It careened wildly, kicking its stubby legs as it sailed over the marshlands. Finally it crashed into a limestone cliff in the distance, causing a minor avalanche. Boulders collapsed on top of the hippo. When the dust settled, there was no sign of the monster. Cars kept driving down the river road. Fishing boats went about their business, as if blue giants fighting hippos was nothing remarkable on this stretch of the Nile.

"Fun!" the blue giant cheered. "Now, who summoned me?"

"Up here!" I yelled.

The giant froze. He carefully patted his scalp until he found me. Then he picked me up with two fingers, waded over to the riverbank, and gently set me down.

He pointed to Zia, who was struggling to reach the shore, and the *Egyptian Queen*, which was drifting downstream, listing and smoking from the stern. "Are those friends of yours?"

"Yes," I said. "Could you help them?"

The giant grinned. "Be right back!"

A few minutes later the *Egyptian Queen* was safely moored. Zia sat next to me on the shore, wringing Nile water out of her hair.

Setne hovered next to us, looking quite smug, even though his arms were still tied. "So maybe *next time* you'll trust me, Carter Kane!" He nodded at the giant, who loomed over us, still grinning like he was *really* excited to be here. "May I present my old friend Hapi!"

The blue giant waved at us. "Hi!"

His eyes were completely dilated. His teeth were brilliant white. A mass of stringy brown hair fell around his shoulders, and his skin rippled in different shades of watery blue. His belly was much too big for his body. It sagged over his fish-scale skirt like he was either pregnant or had swallowed a blimp. He was, without a doubt, the tallest, fattest, bluest, most cheerful hippie giant I had ever met.

I tried to place his name, but I couldn't.

"Hapi?" I asked.

"Why, yes, I am happy!" Hapi beamed. "I'm always happy because I'm Hapi! Are you happy?"

I glanced at Setne, who seemed to find this terribly amusing.

"Hapi is the god of the Nile," the ghost explained. "Along with his other duties, Hapi is the provider of bountiful harvests and all good things, and so he is always—"

"Happy," I guessed.

Zia frowned up at the giant. "Does he have to be so big?"

The god laughed. Immediately he shrank down to human size, though the crazy cheerful look on his face was still pretty unnerving.

"So!" Hapi rubbed his hands with anticipation. "Anything else I can do for you kids? It's been centuries since anybody summoned me. Since they built that stupid Aswan Dam, the Nile doesn't flood every year like it used to. Nobody depends on me anymore. I could *kill* those mortals!"

He said this with a smile, as if he'd suggested bringing the mortals some home-baked cookies.

I did some quick thinking. It's not often a god offers to do you favors—even if that god is psychotically over-caffeinated. "Actually, yes," I said. "See, Setne suggested I summon you to deal with the hippo, but—"

"Oh, Setne!" Hapi chuckled and pushed the ghost playfully. "I *hate* this guy. Absolutely despise him! He's the only magician who ever learned my secret name. Ha!"

Setne shrugged. "It was nothing, really. And I gotta say, you came in handy many times back in the old days."

"Ha, ha!" Hapi's smile became painfully wide. "I'd love to rip off your arms and legs, Setne. That would be amazing!"

Setne's expression remained calm, but he drifted a little farther away from the smiling god.

"Um, anyway," I said. "We're on a quest. We need to find this magic book to defeat Apophis. Setne was leading us to the ruins of Memphis, but now our boat is busted. Do you think—?"

"Oh!" Hapi clapped excitedly. "The world is going to end tomorrow. I forgot!"

Zia and I exchanged looks.

"Right…" I said. "So, if Setne told you exactly where we were going, could you take us there? And, um, if he won't tell you, then you could rip his limbs off. That would be fine."

"Yay!" Hapi cried.

Setne gave me a murderous look. "Yeah, sure. We're going to the *serapeum*—the temple of the Apis Bull."

Hapi smacked his knee. "I should have figured! Brilliant place to hide something. That's pretty far inland, but sure, I can send you there if you want. And just so you know, Apophis has demons scouring the riverbanks. You'd never get to Memphis without my help. You'd get torn into a million pieces!"

He seemed genuinely pleased to share that news.

Zia cleared her throat. "Okay, then. We'd love your help."

I turned toward the *Egyptian Queen*, where Bloodstained Blade stood at the railing, awaiting further orders. "Captain," I called, "wait here and continue repairing the ship. We'll—"

"Oh, the ship can go too!" Hapi interrupted. "That's no problem."

I frowned. I wasn't sure how the river god was going to move the ship, especially since he'd told us Memphis was inland, but I decided not to ask.

“Belay that order,” I called to the captain. “The ship is coming with us. Once we reach Memphis, you’ll continue repairs and await further orders.”

The captain hesitated. Then he bowed his ax-blade head. “I obey, my lord.”

“Great!” Hapi said.

He held out his palm, which contained two slimy black orbs like fish eggs. “Swallow these. One each.”

Zia wrinkled her nose. “What are they?”

“They’ll take you where you want to go!” the god promised. “They’re Hapi pills.”

I blinked. “What now?”

The ghost Setne cleared his throat. He looked like he was trying not to laugh. “Yeah, you know. Hapi invented them. So that’s what they’re called.”

“Just eat them!” Hapi said. “You’ll see.”

Reluctantly, Zia and I took the pills. They tasted even worse than they looked. Instantly, I felt dizzy. The world shimmered like water.

“It was nice to meet you!” Hapi cried, his voice turning murky and distant. “You do realize you’re walking into a trap, don’t you? Okay! Good luck!”

With that, my vision went blue, and my body melted into liquid.

12. Bulls with Freaking Laser Beams

BEING LIQUIDATED IS NOT FUN. I will never be able to walk by another LIQUIDATION SALE sign without getting seasick and feeling like my bones are turning to tapioca.

I know I'm going to sound like a public service announcement here, but for all you kids at home: if somebody offers you Hapi pills, just say, "No!"

I felt myself seeping inland through the mud, traveling at incredible speed. When I hit the hot sand, I evaporated, rising above the ground as a cloud of moisture, pushed west by the winds into the desert. I couldn't exactly see, but I could feel the movement and the heat. My molecules agitated as the sun dispersed me.

Suddenly the temperature dropped again. I sensed cool stone around me—a cave or an underground room, maybe. I coalesced into moisture, splashed to the floor as a puddle, then rose and solidified into Carter Kane once more.

For my next trick, I buckled to my knees and lost my breakfast.

Zia stood near me, hugging her stomach. We seemed to be in the entry tunnel of a tomb. Below us, stone steps led into the darkness. A few feet above, desert sunlight blazed.

"That was *horrible*," Zia gasped.

I could only nod. Now I understood the science lesson my dad had once taught me in homeschooling—matter has three forms: solid, liquid, and gas. In the last few minutes I'd been all three. And I didn't like it.

Setne materialized just outside the doorway, smiling down at us. "So, did I come through again, or what?"

I didn't remember loosening his bonds, but his arms were now free. That would've worried me more if I hadn't felt so sick.

Zia and I were still wet and muddy from our swim in the Nile, but Setne looked immaculate—jeans and T-shirt freshly pressed, Elvis hair perfect, not even a spot on his white running shoes. That disgusted me so much, I staggered into the sunlight and threw up on him. Unfortunately, my stomach was mostly empty and he was a ghost, so nothing much happened.

"Hey, pal!" Setne adjusted his golden *ankh* necklace and straightened his jacket. "Some respect, all right? I did you a favor."

"A favor?" I gulped back the horrible taste in my mouth. "Don't—*ever*—"

"Never Hapi again," Zia finished for me. "Never."

"Aw, c'mon!" Setne spread his hands. "That was a smooth trip! Look, even your ship made it."

I squinted. Mostly we were surrounded by flat, rocky desert, like the surface of Mars; but beached on a nearby sand dune was a slightly broken riverboat—the *Egyptian Queen*. The stern wasn't on fire anymore, but the ship looked like it had taken more damage in transit. A section of railing was broken. One of the smokestacks was leaning dangerously. For some reason, a huge slimy tarp of fish scales was hanging off the pilot's house like a snagged parachute.

Zia muttered, "Oh, gods of Egypt—please don't let that be Hapi's loincloth."

Bloodstained Blade stood at the bow, facing our direction. He had no expression, being an ax head, but from the way his arms were crossed, I could tell he was not a Hapi camper.

"Can you fix the ship?" I called to him.

"Yes, my lord," he hummed. "Given a few hours. Sadly, we seem to be stuck in the middle of a desert."

"We'll worry about that later," I said. "Get the ship repaired. Wait here for us to return. You'll receive more instructions at that time."

"As you say." Bloodstained Blade turned and started humming at the glowing orbs in a language I didn't understand. The crew stirred into a flurry of activity.

Setne smiled. "See? Everything's good!"

"Except we're running out of time." I looked at the sun. I figured it was one or two in the afternoon, and we still had a lot to do before Doomsday tomorrow morning. "Where does that tunnel go? What's a *serapeum*? And why did Hapi say it was a trap?"

"So many questions," Setne said. "Come on, you'll see. You're gonna love this place!"

I did not love this place.

The steps down led to a wide hall chiseled from golden bedrock. The barreled ceiling was so low, I could touch it without stretching my arms. I could tell that archaeologists had been here, from the bare electric bulbs that cast shadows across the arches. Metal beams braced the walls, but the cracks in the ceiling didn't help me feel safe. I'd never been comfortable in enclosed spaces.

Every thirty feet or so, square alcoves opened up on either side of the main hall. Each niche held a massive freestanding stone sarcophagus.

After passing the fourth such coffin, I stopped. "Those things are way too big for humans. What's in there?"

"Bull," Setne said.

"Excuse me?"

Setne's laugh echoed through the hall. I figured that if there were any sleeping monsters in this place, they were awake now.

"These are the burial chambers for the Apis Bull." Setne gestured around him proudly. "I built all this, you know, back when I was Prince Khaemwaset."

Zia ran her hand along the white stone lid of the sarcophagus. "The Apis Bull. My ancestors thought it was an incarnation of Osiris in the mortal world."

"Thought?" Setne snorted. "It *was* his incarnation, doll. At least some of the time—like on festival days and whatnot. We took our Apis Bull seriously back then."

He patted the coffin like he was showing off a used car. "This bad boy here? He had the perfect

life. All the food he could eat. Got a harem of cows, burnt offerings, a special gold cloth for his back—all the perks. Only had to show himself in public a few times a year for big festivals. When he turned twenty-five, he got slaughtered in a big ceremony, mummified like a king, and put down here. Then a new bull took his place. Nice gig, huh?"

"Killed at twenty-five," I said. "Sounds awesome."

I wondered how many mummified bulls were down that hallway. I didn't want to find out. I liked being right here, where I could still see the exit and the sunlight outside. "So why is this place called a—what was it?"

"Serapeum," Zia answered. Her face was illuminated with golden light—probably just the electrical bulbs reflecting off the stone, but it seemed like she was glowing. "Iskandar, my old teacher—he told me about this place. The Apis Bull was a vessel for Osiris. In later times, the names were merged: Osiris-Apis. Then the Greeks shorted it to Serapis."

Setne sneered. "Stupid Greeks. Moving in on our territory. Taking over our gods. I'm telling you, I got no love for those guys. But yeah, that's how it happened. This place became known as a *serapeum*—a house for dead bull gods. Me, I wanted to call it the Khaemwaset Memorial of Pure Awesomeness, but my dad wouldn't go for it."

"Your dad?" I asked.

Setne waved aside the question. "Anyway, I hid the Book of Thoth down here before I died because I knew no one would ever disturb it. You'd have to be frothing-at-the-mouth crazy to mess with the sacred tomb of the Apis Bull."

"Great." I felt like I was turning back into liquid.

Zia frowned at the ghost. "Don't tell me—you hid the book in one of these sarcophagi with a mummified bull, and the bull will come to life if we disturb it?"

Setne winked at her. "Oh, I did better than that, doll. Archaeologists have discovered *this* part of the complex." He gestured at the electric lights and metal support beams. "But I'm gonna take you on a *behind-the-scenes* tour."

The catacombs seemed to go on forever. Hallways split off in different directions, all of them lined with sarcophagi for holy cows. After descending a long slope, we ducked through a secret passage behind an illusionary wall.

On the other side, there were no electric lights. No steel beams braced the cracked ceiling. Zia summoned fire at the tip of her staff and burned away a canopy of cobwebs. Our footprints were the only marks on the dusty floor.

"Are we close?" I asked.

Setne chuckled. "It's just getting good."

He led us farther into the maze. Every so often, he stopped to deactivate traps with a command or a touch. Sometimes he made me do it—supposedly because he couldn't cast certain spells, being dead—though I got the feeling he thought it would be incredibly funny if I failed and died.

"How come you can touch some things but not other things?" I asked. "You seem to have a real selective ability."

Setne shrugged. "I don't make the rules of the spirit world, pal. We can touch money and jewelry. Picking up trash and messing with poison spikes, no. We get to leave that dirty work to the

living."

Whenever the traps were disabled, hidden hieroglyphs glowed and vanished. Sometimes we had to jump over pits that opened in the floor, or swerve when arrows shot from the ceiling. Paintings of gods and pharaohs peeled off the walls, formed into ghostly guardians, and faded. The whole time, Setne kept a running commentary.

"That curse would've made your feet rot off," he explained. "This one over here? That summons a plague of fleas. And this one—oh, man. This is one of my favorites. It turns you into a dwarf! I hate those short little guys."

I frowned. Setne was shorter than me, but I decided to let it go.

"Yes, indeed," he continued. "You're lucky to have me along, pal. Right now, you'd be a flea-bitten dwarf with no feet. And you haven't even seen the worst of it! Right this way."

I wasn't sure how Setne remembered so many details about this place from so long ago, but he was obviously proud of these catacombs. He must have relished designing horrible traps to kill intruders.

We turned down another corridor. The floor sloped again. The ceiling got so low, I had to stoop. I tried to stay calm, but I was having trouble breathing. All I could think about were those tons of stone over my head, ready to collapse at any moment.

Zia took my hand. The tunnel was so narrow, we were walking single file; but I glanced back at her.

"You okay?" I asked.

She mouthed the words: *Watch him.*

I nodded. Whatever trap Hapi had warned us about, I had a feeling we hadn't seen it yet, even though we were surrounded by traps. We were alone with a murderous ghost, deep underground in his home territory. I didn't have my *khopesh* anymore. For some reason I hadn't been able to summon it from the Duat. And I couldn't use my warrior avatar in such a tiny tunnel. If Setne turned on us, my options would be limited.

Finally the corridor widened. We reached a dead end—a solid wall flanked by two statues of my dad…I mean, Osiris.

Setne turned. "Okay, here's the score, you guys. I'm gonna have to cast a disenchantment to open this wall. The spell takes a few minutes. I don't want you freaking out halfway through and wrapping me in pink ribbons, or things could get ugly. Half-finished magic right here, and this whole tunnel could collapse on top of us."

I managed to avoid screaming like a little girl—but only barely.

Zia cranked the fire on her staff to white-hot. "Careful, Setne. I know what a proper disenchantment sounds like. If I suspect you're casting anything else, I'll blast you into ectoplasmic dust."

"Relax, doll." Setne cracked his knuckles. His diamond pinky rings flashed in the firelight. "You gotta keep that scarab under control, or you're gonna turn *yourself* into ashes."

I frowned. "Scarab?"

Setne glanced back and forth between us and laughed. "You mean she hasn't told you? And you haven't figured it out? You *kids* today! I *love* the ignorance!"

He turned toward the wall and began to chant. Zia's fire ebbed to a cooler red flame. I gave her a questioning look.

She hesitated—then touched the base of her throat. She hadn't been wearing a necklace before. I was sure of that. But when she touched her throat, an amulet blinked into existence—a glittering golden scarab on a gold chain. She must have hidden it with a glamor—a magical illusion like Setne had done with the Ribbons of Hathor.

The scarab looked metal, but I realized I'd seen it before, and I'd seen it *alive*. Back when Ra had imprisoned Apophis in the Underworld, he'd given up part of his soul—his incarnation as Khepri, scarab of the morning sun—to keep his enemy confined. He'd buried Apophis under a landslide of living beetles.

By the time Sadie and I had found that prison last spring, millions of scarabs had been reduced to desiccated shells. When Apophis broke free, only one golden beetle survived: the last remnant of Khepri's power.

Ra had tried to swallow that scarab. (Yes, disgusting. I know.) When that didn't work…he'd offered it to Zia.

I didn't remember Zia taking the scarab, but somehow I knew that amulet was the same bug.

"Zia—"

She shook her head adamantly. "Later."

She gestured at Setne, who was in the middle of his spell.

Okay, probably not a good time to talk. I didn't want the tunnel coming down on us. But my mind was reeling.

You haven't figured it out? Setne had taunted me.

I knew Ra was fascinated with Zia. She was his favorite babysitter. Setne mentioned that Zia was having temperature control problems. *The old man is getting to you*, he'd said. And Ra had given Zia that scarab—literally a piece of his soul—as if she were his high priestess…or maybe someone even more important.

The tunnel rumbled. The dead-end wall dissolved into dust, revealing a chamber beyond.

Setne glanced back at us with a smile. "Showtime, kids."

We followed him into a circular room that reminded me of the library at Brooklyn House. The floor was a sparkling mosaic of pastures and rivers. On the walls, painted priests were adorning painted cows with flowers and feathery headdresses for some kind of festival, while Ancient Egyptians waved palm fronds and shook bronze noisemakers called *sistrums*. The domed ceiling depicted Osiris on his throne, passing judgment over a bull. For an absurd moment, I wondered if Ammit devoured the hearts of wicked cows, and if he liked the beefy taste.

In the middle of the chamber, on a coffin-shaped pedestal, stood a life-sized statue of the Apis Bull. It was made of dark stone—basalt, maybe—but painted so skillfully, it looked alive. Its eyes seemed to follow me. Its hide glistened black except for a small white diamond on the front of its chest, and over its back was a gold blanket cut and embroidered to resemble a hawk's wings. Between its horns sat a Frisbee of gold—a sun disk crown. Beneath that, sticking out of the bull's forehead like a curly unicorn horn, was a rearing cobra.

A year ago I would've said, "Freaky, but at least it's just a statue." Now, I'd had lots of

experience with Egyptian statues coming to life and trying to stomp the *ankh* out of me.

Setne didn't seem worried. He strolled right up to the stone bull and patted its leg. "The Shrine of Apis! I built this chamber just for my chosen priests and me. Now all we have to do is wait."

"Wait for what?" Zia asked. Being a smart girl, she was hanging back by the entrance with me.

Setne checked his nonexistent watch. "It won't be long. Just a timer, sort of. Come on in! Make yourself comfortable."

I edged my way inside. I waited for the doorway to solidify behind me, but it stayed open. "You sure the book is still here?"

"Oh, yeah." Setne walked around the statue, checking the base. "I just need to remember which of these panels on the dais is going to pop open. I wanted to make this entire room out of gold, you know? That would've been much cooler. But Dad cut back on my funding."

"Your dad." Zia stepped next to me and slipped her hand into mine, which I didn't mind. The golden scarab necklace glinted around her neck. "You mean Ramses the Great?"

Setne's mouth twisted in a cruel sneer. "Yeah, that's how his PR department branded him. Me, I liked to call him Ramses II, or Ramses Number Two."

"Ramses?" I said. "Your dad is *the* Ramses?"

I suppose I hadn't processed how Setne fit into Egyptian history. Looking at this scrawny little guy with his greasy hair, his shoulder-padded jacket, and his ridiculous bling, I couldn't believe he was related to a ruler so famous. Even worse, it made him related to *me*, since our mom's side of the family traced its magic heritage from Ramses the Great.

(Sadie says she can see the family resemblance between Setne and me. [Shut up, Sadie.])

I guess Setne didn't like my looking surprised. He stuck his beaky nose in the air. "You should know what it's like, Carter Kane—growing up in the shadow of a famous dad. Always trying to live up to his legend. Look at you, son of the great Dr. Julius Kane. You finally make a name for yourself as a big-shot magician, what does your dad do? He goes and becomes a god."

Setne laughed coldly. I'd never felt any resentment toward my father before; I'd always thought it was cool being Dr. Kane's son. But Setne's words rolled over me, and anger started to build in my chest.

He's playing with you, said the voice of Horus.

I knew Horus was right, but that didn't make me feel better.

"Where's the book, Setne?" I asked. "Enough delays."

"Don't warp your wand, pal. It won't be much longer." He gazed at the picture of Osiris on the ceiling. "There he is! The blue dude himself. I'm telling you, Carter, you and I are a lot alike. I can't go anywhere in Egypt without seeing my dad's face, either. Abu Simbel? There's Papa Ramses glaring down at me—four copies of him, each sixty feet tall. It's like a nightmare. Half the temples in Egypt? He commissioned them and put up statues of himself. Is it any wonder I wanted to be the world's *biggest* magician?" He puffed up his scrawny chest. "And I made it, too. What I don't understand, Carter Kane, is why you haven't taken the pharaoh's throne yet. You've got Horus on your side, itching for power. You should merge with the god, become the pharaoh of the world, and, ah…" He patted the Apis statue. "Take the bull by the horns."

He's right, Horus said. *This human has wisdom.*

Make up your mind, I complained.

"Carter, don't listen to him," Zia said. "Setne, whatever you're up to—stop. Now."

"What *I'm* up to? Look, doll—"

"Don't call me that!" Zia said.

"Hey, I'm on your side," Setne promised. "The book's right here in the dais. As soon as the bull moves—"

"The bull *moves*?" I asked.

Setne narrowed his eyes. "Didn't I mention that? I got the idea from this holiday we used to have in the old days, the Festival of Sed. Awesome fun! You ever been to that Running of the Bulls in, what is it, Spain?"

"Pamplona," I said. Another wave of resentment got the best of me. My dad had taken me to Pamplona once, but he hadn't let me go out in the street while the bulls were running through town. He'd said it was too dangerous—as if his secret life as a magician weren't *way* more dangerous than that.

"Right, Pamplona," Setne agreed. "Well, you know where that tradition started? Egypt. The pharaoh would do this ritual race with the Apis Bull to renew his kingly power, prove his strength, get blessed by the gods—all that junk. In later times, it became just a charade, no real danger. But at the beginning, it was the real thing. Life and death."

On the word *death*, the bull statue moved. He bent his legs stiffly. Then he lowered his head and glared at me, snorting out a cloud of dust.

"Setne!" I reached for my sword, but of course it wasn't there. "Make that thing stop, or I'll wrap you in ribbons so fast—"

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," Setne warned. "See, I'm the only one who can pick up the book without getting zapped by about sixteen different curses."

Between the bull's horns, its golden sun disk flashed. On its forehead, the cobra writhed to life, hissing and spitting gobs of fire.

Zia drew her wand. Was it my imagination, or was her scarab necklace starting to steam? "Call off that creature, Setne. Or I swear—"

"I can't, doll. Sorry." He grinned at us from behind the bull's dais. He didn't look very sorry. "This is part of the security system, see? If you want the book, you've got to distract the bull and get it out of here, while I open the dais and grab the Book of Thoth. I have complete faith in you."

The bull pawed his pedestal and leaped off. Zia pulled me back into the hallway.

"That's it!" Setne shouted. "Just like the Sed Festival. Prove you're worthy of the pharaoh's throne, kid. Run or die!"

The bull charged.

A sword would've been really nice. I would've settled for a matador's cape and a spear. Or an assault rifle. Instead, Zia and I ran back through the catacombs and quickly realized that we were lost. Letting Setne lead us into the maze had been a stupid idea. I should've dropped breadcrumbs or marked the walls with hieroglyphs or something.

I hoped the tunnels would be too narrow for the Apis Bull. No such luck. I heard rock walls

rumbling behind us as the bull shouldered his way through. There was another sound I liked even less—a deep hum followed by an explosion. I didn't know what that was, but it was good incentive to run faster.

We must have passed through a dozen halls. Each had twenty or thirty sarcophagi. I couldn't believe how many Apises had been mummified down here—centuries' worth of bull. Behind us, our monstrous stone friend bellowed as he smashed his way through the tunnels.

I glanced back once and was sorry I did. The bull was closing fast, the cobra on his forehead spewing fire.

"This way!" Zia cried.

She pulled me down a side corridor. At the far end, what looked like daylight spilled from an open doorway. We sprinted toward it.

I was hoping for an exit. Instead we stumbled into another circular chamber. There was no bull statue in the middle, but spaced around the circumference were four giant stone sarcophagi. The walls were painted with pictures of bovine paradise—cows being fed, cows frolicking in meadows, cows being worshipped by silly little humans. The daylight streamed from a shaft in the domed ceiling, twenty feet above. A beam of sunshine sliced through the dusty air and hit the middle of the floor like a spotlight, but there was no way we could use the shaft to escape. Even if I turned into a falcon, the opening was too narrow, and I wasn't about to leave Zia alone.

"Dead end," she said.

"HRUUUFF!" The Apis Bull loomed in the doorway, blocking our exit. His hood ornament cobra hissed.

We backed into the room until we stood in the warm sunlight. It seemed cruel to die here, stuck under thousands of tons of rock but able to see the sun.

The bull pawed the floor. He took a step forward, then hesitated, as if the sunlight bothered him.

"Maybe I can talk to him," I said. "He's connected to Osiris, right?"

Zia looked at me like I was crazy—which I was—but I didn't have any better ideas.

She readied her wand and staff. "I'll cover you."

I stepped toward the monster and showed my empty hands. "Nice bull. I'm Carter Kane. Osiris is my dad, sort of. How about we call a truce and—"

The cobra spewed fire in my face.

It would've turned me into an extra-crispy Carter, but Zia shouted a command. As I stumbled backward, her staff absorbed the blast, sucking in the flames like a vacuum cleaner. She sliced the air with her wand, and a shimmering red wall of fire erupted around the Apis Bull. Unfortunately, the bull just stood there and glared at us, completely unharmed.

Zia cursed. "We seem to be at an impasse with the fire magic."

The bull lowered its horns.

My war god instincts took control. "Take cover!"

Zia dove one way. I dove the other. The bull's sun disk glowed and hummed, then shot a golden beam of heat right where we'd been standing. I barely made it behind a sarcophagus. My clothes were steaming. The bottoms of my shoes were melted. Where the beam had hit, the floor was blackened and bubbling, as if the rock had reached boiling point.

"Cows with laser beams?" I protested. "That's *completely* unfair!"

"Carter!" Zia called from across the room. "You okay?"

"We'll have to split up!" I shouted back. "I'll distract it. You get out of here!"

"What? No!"

The bull turned toward the sound of her voice. I had to move fast.

My avatar wouldn't be much good in an enclosed space like this, but I needed the war god's strength and speed. I summoned the power of Horus. Blue light flickered around me. My skin felt as thick as steel, my muscles as powerful as hydraulic pistons. I rose to my feet, smashed my fists into the sarcophagus, and reduced it to a pile of stone and mummy dust. I picked up a chunk of the lid—a three-hundred-pound stone shield—and charged at the bull.

We smashed into each other. Somehow I held my ground, but it took every bit of my magical strength. The bull bellowed and pushed. The cobra spit flames that rolled over the top of my shield.

"Zia, get out of here!" I shouted.

"I'm not leaving you!"

"You've got to! I can't—"

The hairs on my arms stood up even before I heard the humming sound. My slab of stone disintegrated in a flash of gold, and I flew backward, crashing into another sarcophagus.

My vision blurred. I heard Zia shout. When my eyes could focus again, I saw her standing in the middle of the room, wrapped in sunlight, chanting a spell I didn't recognize. She'd gotten the bull's attention, which had probably saved my life. But before I could cry out, the bull aimed his sun disk and shot a superheated laser beam straight at Zia.

"No!" I screamed.

The light blinded me. The heat sucked all the oxygen out of my lungs. There was no way Zia could have survived that hit.

But when the golden light faded, Zia was still there. Around her burned a massive shield shaped like…like a scarab shell. Her eyes glowed with orange fire. Flames swirled around her. She looked at the bull and spoke a deep rasping voice that definitely wasn't hers: "I am Khepri, the rising sun. I will not be denied."

Only later did I realize that she'd spoken in Ancient Egyptian.

She thrust out her hand. A miniature comet shot toward the Apis Bull and the monster burst into flames, turning and stomping, suddenly panicked. His legs crumbled. He collapsed and broke into a smoking pile of charred rubble.

The room was suddenly quiet. I was afraid to move. Zia was still wreathed in fire, and it seemed to be getting hotter—burning yellow, then white. She stood as if in a trance. The golden scarab around her neck was definitely smoking now.

"Zia!" My head throbbed, but I managed to rise.

She turned toward me and hefted another fireball.

"Zia, no!" I said. "It's me. Carter."

She hesitated. "Carter…?" Her expression turned to confusion, then fear. The orange flames faded in her eyes, and she collapsed in the pool of sunlight.

I ran to her. I tried to gather her in my arms, but her skin was too hot to touch. The golden scarab had left a nasty burn on her throat.

"Water," I muttered to myself. "I need water."

I'd never been good at divine words, but I shouted: *"Maw!"*

The symbol blazed above us:

Several cubic gallons of water materialized in midair and crashed down on us. Zia's face steamed. She coughed and spluttered, but she didn't wake. Her fever still felt dangerously high.

"I'll get you out of here," I promised, lifting her in my arms.

I didn't need the strength of Horus. I had so much adrenaline coursing through my body, I didn't feel any of my own injuries. I ran right by Setne when he passed me in the hall.

"Hey, pal!" He turned and jogged along next to me, waving a thick papyrus scroll. "Good job! I got the Book of Thoth!"

"You almost killed Zia!" I snapped. "Get us out of here—NOW!"

"Okay, okay," Setne said. "Calm down."

"I'm taking you back to my dad's courtroom," I growled. "I'm going to *personally* stuff you down Ammit's mouth, like a branch into a wood chipper."

"Whoa, big man." Setne led me up a sloping passage back to the electrical lighting of the excavated tunnels. "How about we get you out of here first, huh? Remember, you still need me to decipher this book and find the serpent's shadow. Then we'll see about the wood chipper, okay?"

"She can't die," I insisted.

"Right, I got that." Setne led me through more tunnels, picking up speed. Zia seemed to weigh nothing. My headache had disappeared. Finally we burst into the sunlight and ran for the *Egyptian Queen*.

I'll admit I wasn't thinking straight.

When we got back on board, Bloodstained Blade reported on the ship's repairs, but I barely heard him. I plowed right past him and carried Zia inside to the nearest cabin. I set her on the bed and rummaged through my pack for medical supplies—a water bottle, some magic salve Jaz had given me, a few written charms. I was no *rekhet* like Jaz. My healing powers consisted mostly of bandages and aspirin, but I began to work.

"Come on," I mumbled. "Come on, Zia. You're going to be fine."

She was so warm, her drenched clothes had almost dried. Her eyes were rolled back in her head. She started muttering, and I could've sworn she said, "Dung balls. Time to roll the dung balls."

It might've been funny—except for the fact that she was dying.

"That's Khepri talking," Setne explained. "He's the divine dung beetle, rolling the sun across the sky."

I didn't want to process that—the idea that the girl I liked had been possessed by a dung beetle

and was now having dreams about pushing a giant sphere of flaming poo across the sky.

But there was no question: Zia had used the path of the gods. She'd called on Ra—or at least one of his incarnations, Khepri.

Ra had chosen her, the way Horus had chosen me.

Suddenly it made sense that Apophis had destroyed Zia's village when she was young, and that the old Chief Lector Iskandar had gone to such lengths to train her and then hide her in a magical sleep. If she held the secret to reawakening the sun god…

I dabbed some ointment on her throat. I pressed a cold washcloth to her forehead, but it didn't seem to help.

I turned to Setne. "Heal her!"

"Oh, um…" He winced. "See, healing magic isn't really my thing. But at least you've got the Book of Thoth! If she dies, it wasn't for nothing—"

"If she dies," I warned, "I will…I will…" I couldn't think of a torture painful enough.

"I see you need some time," Setne said. "No problem. How about I go tell your captain where we're heading? We should get back to the Duat, back onto the River of Night as soon as possible. Do I have your permission to give him orders?"

"Fine," I snapped. "Just get out of my sight."

I don't know how much time passed. Zia's fever seemed to subside. She started breathing more easily and slipped into a gentler sleep. I kissed her forehead and stayed by her side, holding her hand.

I was dimly aware of the ship's moving. We dropped into a momentary free-fall, then hit water with a shudder and a loud splash. I felt a river rolling under the hull once again, and from the tingling in my gut, I guessed we were back in the Duat.

The door creaked open behind me, but I kept my eyes on Zia.

I waited for Setne to say something—probably to brag about how well he'd done navigating us back to the River of Night—but he stayed silent.

"Well?" I asked.

The sound of splintering wood made me jump.

Setne wasn't at the door. Instead, Bloodstained Blade loomed over me, his ax head having just split the doorframe. His fists were clenched.

He spoke in an angry, cold hum: "Lord Kane, it's time to die."

SADIE

13. A Friendly Game of Hide-and-Seek (with Bonus Points for Painful Death!)

I SEE. LEAVE OFF WITH THE AX-MURDERING DEMON. Trying to make my part of the story seem boring, eh? Carter, you are *such* an attention hog.

Well, as you were cruising down the Nile in a lavishly appointed riverboat, Walt and I were traveling in a bit less style.

From the realm of the dead, I ventured another conversation with Isis to negotiate a doorway into the Nile Delta. Isis must have been cross with me (I can't imagine why) because she deposited Walt and me waist-deep in a swamp, our feet completely stuck in the mud.

"Thanks!" I yelled at the sky.

I tried to move but couldn't. Clouds of mosquitoes gathered around us. The river was alive with bubbling and splashing noises, which made me think of pointy-toothed tiger fish and the water elementals Carter had once described to me.

"Any ideas?" I asked Walt.

Now that he was back in the mortal world, he seemed to have lost his vitality. He looked…I suppose the phrase would be *hollowed out*. His clothes fit more loosely. The whites of his eyes were tinted an unhealthy yellow. His shoulders hunched, as if the amulets around his neck weighed him down. Seeing him like this made me want to cry—which is not something I do easily.

"Yeah," he said, digging through his bag. "I have just the thing."

He brought out a *shabti*—a white wax figurine of a crocodile.

"Oh, you didn't," I said. "You wonderfully naughty boy."

Walt smiled. For a moment he almost looked like his old self. "Everyone was abandoning Brooklyn House. I figured it wasn't right to leave him behind."

He tossed the figurine in the river and spoke a command word. Philip of Macedonia erupted from the water.

Being surprised by a giant crocodile in the Nile is something you usually want to avoid, but Philip was a welcome sight. He smiled at me with his massive croc teeth, his pink eyes gleaming and his white scaly back floating just above the surface.

Walt and I grabbed hold. In no time, Philip had pulled us free of the muck. Soon we were perched on his back, making our way upriver. I rode in front, straddling Philip's shoulders. Walt sat behind at Philip's midsection. Philip was such a roomy crocodile that this left considerable space between Walt and me—possibly more than I would've preferred. Nevertheless we had a lovely ride,

except for being drenched, caked in mud, and swarmed by mosquitoes.

The landscape was a maze of waterways, grassy islands, reed beds, and muddy shoals. It was impossible to tell where the river ended and the land began. Occasionally in the distance we saw plowed fields or the rooftops of small villages, but mostly we had the river to ourselves. We saw several crocodiles, but they all steered clear of us. They would be quite insane to bother Philip.

Like Carter and Zia, we'd got a late start leaving the Underworld. I was alarmed at how far the sun had already climbed in the sky. The heat turned the air into a soupy haze. My shirt and trousers were soaked through. I wished I'd brought a change of clothes, though it wouldn't have made much difference, as my pack was damp, too. Also, with Walt around, there was no place to change.

After a while, I got bored with watching the Delta. I turned and sat cross-legged, facing Walt. "If we had some wood, we could start a campfire on Philip's back."

Walt laughed. "I don't think he'd like that. Plus, I'm not sure we want to send up smoke signals."

"You think we're being watched?"

His expression turned serious. "If I were Apophis, or even Sarah Jacobi…"

He didn't need to finish that thought. Any number of villains wanted us dead. Of *course* they'd be looking for us.

Walt rummaged through his collection of necklaces. I didn't notice the gentle curves of his mouth at all, or how his shirt clung to his chest in the humid air. No—all business, that's me.

He chose an amulet shaped like an ibis—Thoth's sacred animal. Walt whispered to it and threw it into the air. The charm expanded into a beautiful white bird with a long curved beak and black-tipped wings. It circled above us, buffeting my face with wind, then flew off slowly and gracefully over the wetlands. It reminded me of a stork from those old cartoons—the birds who bring babies in bundles. For some ridiculous reason, that thought made me blush.

"You're sending it to scout ahead?" I guessed.

Walt nodded. "It'll look for the ruins of Saïs. Hopefully they're close by."

Unless Isis sent us to the wrong end of the Delta, I thought.

Isis didn't reply, which was proof enough she was miffed.

We glided upstream on Crocodile Cruise Line. Normally I wouldn't have felt uncomfortable having so much face time with Walt, but there was so much to say, and no good way to say it. Tomorrow morning, one way or another, our long fight against Apophis would be over.

Of course I was worried about *all* of us. I'd left Carter with the sociopathic ghost of Uncle Vinnie. I hadn't even got up the courage to tell him that Zia occasionally became a fireball-lobbing maniac. I worried about Amos and his struggle with Set. I worried about our young initiates, virtually alone at the First Nome and no doubt terrified. I felt heartbroken for my father, who sat on his Underworld throne grieving for our mother—yet again—and of course I feared for my mother's spirit, on the verge of destruction somewhere in the Duat.

More than anything, I was concerned about Walt. The rest of us had *some* chance of surviving, however slim. Even if we prevailed, Walt was doomed. According to Setne, Walt might not even survive our trip to Saïs.

I didn't need anyone to tell me that. All I had to do was lower my vision into the Duat. A gray sickly aura swirled around Walt, growing weaker and weaker. How long, I wondered, before he

turned into the mummified vision I'd seen in Dallas?

Then again, there was the *other* vision I'd seen at the Hall of Judgment. After talking to the jackal guardian, Walt had turned to me, and just for a moment, I thought he was…

"Anubis wanted to be there," Walt interrupted my thoughts. "I mean, in the Hall of Judgment—he wanted to be there for you, if that's what you were wondering about."

I scowled. "I was wondering about *you*, Walt Stone. You're running out of time, and we haven't had a proper talk about it."

Even saying *that* much was difficult.

Walt trailed his feet in the water. He'd set his shoes to dry on Philip's tail. Boys' feet are not something I find attractive, especially when they've just been removed from mucky trainers. However, Walt's feet were quite nice. His toes were almost the same color as the swirling silt in the Nile.

(Carter is complaining about my comments on Walt's feet. Well, *pardon me*. It was easier to focus on his toes than on the sad look on his face!)

"Tonight at the latest," he said. "But, Sadie, it's okay."

Anger swelled inside me, taking me quite by surprise.

"Stop it!" I snapped. "It's not anywhere *close* to okay! Oh, yes, you've told me how grateful you are to have known me, and learned magic at Brooklyn House, and helped with the fight against Apophis. All very noble. But it's not—" My voice broke. "It's not okay."

I pounded my fist on Philip's scaly back, which wasn't fair to the crocodile. Yelling at Walt wasn't fair either. But I was tired of tragedy. I wasn't *designed* for all this loss and sacrifice and horrible sadness. I wanted to throw my arms around Walt, but there was a wall between us—this knowledge that he was doomed. My feelings for him were so mixed up, I didn't know whether I was driven by simple attraction, or guilt, or (dare I say it) love—or stubborn determination not to lose someone else I cared about.

"Sadie…" Walt gazed across the marshes. He looked quite helpless, and I suppose I couldn't blame him. I was being rather impossible. "If I die for something I believe in…that's okay with me. But death doesn't have to be the end. I've been talking with Anubis, and—"

"Gods of Egypt, not *that* again!" I said. "*Please* don't talk about him. I know exactly what he's been telling you."

Walt looked startled. "You do? And…you don't like the idea?"

"Of course not!" I yelled.

Walt looked absolutely crestfallen.

"Oh, come off it!" I said. "I know Anubis is the guide for the dead. He's been preparing you for the afterlife. He's told you that it'll be right. You'll die a noble death, get a speedy trial, and go straight into Ancient Egyptian Paradise. Bloody wonderful! You'll be a ghost like my poor mother. Perhaps it's not the end of the world for *you*. If it makes you feel better about your fate, then fine. But I don't want to hear about it. I don't need another…another person I can't be with."

My face was burning. It was bad enough that my mother was a spirit. I could never properly hug her again, never go shopping with her, never get advice about *girl* sorts of things. Bad enough that I'd been cut off from Anubis—that horribly frustrating gorgeous god who'd wrapped my heart into knots.

Deep down, I'd always known a relationship with him was impossible given our age difference—five thousand years or so—but having the other gods decree him off-limits just rubbed salt in the wound.

Now to think of Walt as a spirit, out of reach as well—that was simply too much.

I looked up at him, afraid my bratty behavior would have made him feel even worse.

To my surprise, he broke into a smile. Then he laughed.

"What?" I demanded.

He doubled over, still laughing, which I found quite inconsiderate.

"You find this funny?" I shouted. "Walt Stone!"

"No…" He hugged his sides. "No, it's just… You don't understand. It's not like that."

"Well, then, what *is* it like?"

He got control of himself. He seemed to be collecting his thoughts when his white ibis dived out of the sky. It landed on Philip's head, flapped its wings, and cawed.

Walt's smile melted. "We're here. The ruins of Saïs."

Philip carried us ashore. We put on our shoes and waded across the marshy ground. In front of us stretched a forest of palm trees, hazy in the afternoon light. Herons flew overhead. Orange-and-black bees hovered over the papyrus plants.

One bee landed on Walt's arm. Several more circled his head.

Walt looked more perplexed than worried. "The goddess who's supposed to live around here, Neith…didn't she have something to do with bees?"

"No idea," I admitted. For some reason, I felt the urge to speak quietly.

[Yes, Carter. It *was* a first for me. Thanks for asking.]

I peered through the palm forest. In the distance, I thought I saw a clearing with a few clumps of mud brick sticking above the grass like rotten teeth.

I pointed them out to Walt. "The remains of a temple?"

Walt must have felt the same instinct for stealth that I did. He crouched in the grass, trying to lower his profile. Then he glanced back nervously at Philip of Macedonia. "Maybe we shouldn't have a three-thousand-pound crocodile trampling through the woods with us."

"Agreed," I said.

He whispered a command word. Philip shrank back to a small wax statuette. Walt pocketed our croc, and we began sneaking toward the ruins.

The closer we got, the more bees filled the air. When we arrived at the clearing, we found an entire colony swarming like a living carpet over a cluster of crumbling mud-brick walls.

Next to them, sitting on a weathered block of stone, a woman leaned on a bow, sketching in the dirt with an arrow.

She was beautiful in a severe way—thin and pale with high cheekbones, sunken eyes, and arched eyebrows, like a supermodel walking the line between glamorous and malnourished. Her hair was glossy black, braided on either side with flint arrowheads. Her haughty expression seemed to say: *I'm much too cool to even look at you.*

There was nothing glamorous about her clothes, however. She was dressed for the hunt in desert-colored fatigues—beige, brown, and ochre. Several knives hung from her belt. A quiver was strapped to her back, and her bow looked like quite a serious weapon—polished wood carved with hieroglyphs of power.

Most disturbing of all, she seemed to be waiting for us.

"You're noisy," she complained. "I could've killed you a dozen times already."

I glanced at Walt, then back at the huntress. "Um…thanks? For not killing us, I mean."

The woman snorted. "Don't thank me. You'll have to do better than that if you want to survive."

I didn't like the sound of that, but generally speaking, I don't ask heavily armed women to elaborate on such statements.

Walt pointed to the symbol the huntress was drawing in the dirt—an oval with four pointy bits like legs.

"You're Neith," Walt guessed. "That's your symbol—the shield with crossed arrows."

The goddess raised her eyebrows. "Think much? Of *course* I'm Neith. And, yes, that's my symbol."

"It looks like a bug," I said.

"It's not a bug!" Neith glowered. Behind her, the bees became agitated, crawling over the mud bricks.

"You're right," I decided. "Not a bug."

Walt wagged his finger as if he'd just had a thought. "The bees…I remember now. That was one name for your temple—the House of the Bee."

"Bees are tireless hunters," Neith said. "Fearless warriors. I like bees."

"Uh, who doesn't?" I offered. "Charming little…buzzers. But you see, we're here on a mission."

I began to explain about Bes and his shadow.

Neith cut me off with a wave of her arrow. "I know why you're here. The others told me."

I moistened my lips. "The others?"

"Russian magicians," she said. "They were terrible prey. After that, a few demons came by. They weren't much better. They all wanted to kill you."

I moved a step closer to Walt. "I see. And so you—"

"Destroyed them, of course," Neith said.

Walt made a sound somewhere between a grunt and a whimper. "Destroyed them because…they were evil?" he said hopefully. "You knew the demons and those magicians were working for Apophis, right? It's a conspiracy."

"Of course it's a conspiracy," Neith said. "They're *all* in on it—the mortals, the magicians, the demons, the tax collectors. But I'm on to them. Anyone who invades my territory pays." She gave me a hard smile. "I take trophies."

From under the collar of her army jacket, she dug out a necklace. I winced, expecting to see some grisly bits of…well, I don't even want to say. Instead, the cord was strung with ragged squares of cloth—denim, linen, silk.

"Pockets," Neith confided, a wicked gleam in her eyes.

Walt's hands went instinctively to the sides of his workout pants. "You, um…took their *pockets*?"

"Do you think me cruel?" Neith asked. "Oh, yes, I collect the pockets of my enemies."

"Horrifying," I said. "I didn't know demons had pockets."

"Oh, yes." Neith glanced in either direction, apparently to be sure no one was eavesdropping. "You just have to know where to look."

"Right…" I said. "So anyway, we've come to find Bes's shadow."

"Yes," the goddess said.

"And I understand you're a friend of Bes and Tawaret's."

"That's true. I like them. They're ugly. I don't think they're in the conspiracy."

"Oh, definitely not! So could you, perhaps, show us where Bes's shadow is?"

"I could. It dwells in my realm—in the shadows of ancient times."

"In the…what now?"

I was *so* sorry I asked.

Neith nocked her arrow and shot it toward the sky. As it sailed upward, the air rippled. A shockwave spread across the landscape, and I felt momentarily dizzy.

When I blinked, I found that the afternoon sky had turned a more brilliant blue, striped with orange clouds. The air was crisp and clean. Flocks of geese flew overhead. The palm trees were taller; the grass was greener—

[Yes, Carter, I know it sounds silly. But the grass really *was* greener on the other side.]

Where the mud-brick ruins had been, a proud temple now stood. Walt, Neith, and I were just outside the walls, which rose ten meters and gleamed brilliant white in the sun. The whole complex must have been at least a kilometer square. Halfway down the left wall, a gate glittered with gold filigree. A road lined with stone sphinxes led to the river, where sailboats were docked.

Disorienting? Yes. But I'd had a similar experience once before, when I'd touched the curtains of light in the Hall of Ages.

"We're in the past?" I guessed.

"A shadow of it," Neith said. "A memory. This is my refuge. It may be your burial ground, unless you survive the hunt."

I tensed. "You mean…you hunt *us*? But we're not your enemy! Bes is your friend. You should be helping us!"

"Sadie's right," Walt said. "*Apophis* is your enemy. He's going to destroy the world tomorrow morning."

Neith snorted. "The end of the world? I've seen *that* coming for eons. You soft mortals have ignored the warning signs, but I'm prepared. I've got an underground bunker stockpiled with food, clean water, and enough weapons and ammunition to hold off a zombie army."

Walt knit his eyebrows. "A zombie army?"

"You never know!" Neith snapped. "The point is, I'll survive the apocalypse. I can live off the land!" She jabbed a finger at me. "Did you know the palm tree has six different edible parts?"

"Um—"

"And I'll never be bored," Neith continued, "since I'm also the goddess of weaving. I have enough twine for a millennium of macramé!"

I had no reply, as I wasn't sure what macramé was.

Walt raised his hands. "Neith, that's great, but Apophis is rising tomorrow. He'll swallow the sun, plunge the world into darkness, and let the whole earth crumble back into the Sea of Chaos."

"I'll be safe in my bunker," Neith insisted. "If you can prove to me that you're friend and not foe, maybe I'll help you with Bes. Then you can join me in the bunker. I'll teach you survival skills. We'll eat rations and weave new clothes from the pockets of our enemies!"

Walt and I exchanged looks. The goddess was a nutter. Unfortunately, we needed her help.

"So you want to hunt us," I said. "And we're supposed to survive—"

"Until sunset," she said. "Evade me that long, and you can live in my bunker."

"I've got a counteroffer," I said quickly. "No bunker. If we win, you help us find Bes's shadow, but you'll also fight on our side against Apophis. If you're really a war goddess and a huntress and all that, you should enjoy a good battle."

Neith grinned. "Done! I'll even give you a five-minute head start. But I should warn you: I never lose. When I kill you, I'll take your pockets!"

"You drive a hard bargain," I said. "But fine."

Walt elbowed me. "Um, Sadie—"

I shot him a warning look. As I saw it, there was no way we could escape this hunt, but I *did* have an idea that might keep us alive.

"We've begun!" Neith cried. "You can go anywhere in my territory, which is basically the entire delta. It doesn't matter. I'll find you."

Walt said, "But—"

"Four minutes, now," Neith said.

We did the only sensible thing. We turned and ran.

"What is macramé?" I yelled as we barreled through the rushes.

"A kind of weaving," Walt said. "Why are we talking about this?"

"Dunno," I admitted. "Just cur—"

The world turned upside down—or rather, I did. I found myself hanging in a scratchy twine net with my feet in the air.

"*That's* macramé," Walt said.

"Lovely. Get me down!"

He pulled a knife from his pack—practical boy—and managed to free me, but I reckoned we'd lost most of our head start. The sun was lower on the horizon, but how long would we have to survive—thirty minutes? An hour?

Walt rifled through his pack and briefly considered the white wax crocodile. "Philip, maybe?"

"No," I said. "We can't fight Neith head-on. We have to avoid her. We can split—"

"Tiger. Boat. Sphinx. Camels. No invisibility," Walt muttered, examining his amulets. "Why don't I have an amulet for invisibility?"

I shuddered. The last time I'd tried invisibility, it hadn't gone very well. "Walt, she's a hunting goddess. We probably couldn't fool her with any sort of concealment spell, even if you had one."

"Then what?" he asked.

I put my finger on Walt's chest and tapped the one amulet he wasn't considering—a necklace that was the twin to mine.

"The *shen* amulets?" He blinked. "But how can those help?"

"We split up and buy time," I said. "We can share thoughts through the amulets, yes?"

"Well…yes."

"And they can teleport us to each other's side, right?"

Walt frowned. "I—I designed them for that, but—"

"If we split up," I said, "Neith will have to choose one of us to track. We get as far apart as possible. If she finds me first, you teleport me out of danger with the amulet. Or vice versa. Then we split up again, and we keep at it."

"That's brilliant," Walt admitted. "If the amulets will work quickly enough. And if we can keep the mental connection. And if Neith doesn't kill one of us before we can call for help. And—"

I put my finger to his lips. "Let's just leave it at 'That's brilliant.'"

He nodded, then gave me a hasty kiss. "Good luck."

The silly boy shouldn't do things like that when I need to stay focused. He dashed off to the north and, after a dazed moment, I ran south.

Squishy combat boots are not the best for sneaking around.

I considered wading into the river, thinking perhaps the water would obscure my trail, but I didn't want to go for a swim without knowing what was under the surface—crocs, snakes, evil spirits. Carter once told me that most Ancient Egyptians couldn't swim, which had seemed ridiculous to me at the time. How could people living next to a river not swim? Now I understood. No one in his right mind would want to take a dip in that water.

(Carter says a swim in the Thames or the East River would be almost as bad for your health. All right, fair point. [Now shut up, brother dear, and let me get back to the brilliant Sadie-saves-the-day part.])

I ran along the banks, crashing through reeds, jumping straight over a sunning crocodile. I didn't bother to check if it was chasing me. I had bigger predators to worry about.

I'm not sure how long I ran. It seemed like miles. As the riverbank widened, I veered inland, trying to stay under the cover of the palm trees. I heard no signs of pursuit, but I had a constant itch in the middle of my shoulder blades where I expected an arrow.

I stumbled through a clearing where some Ancient Egyptians in loincloths were cooking over an open fire next to a small thatched hut. Perhaps the Egyptians were just shadows from the past, but they looked real enough. They seemed quite startled to see a blond girl in combat clothes stumble into their encampment. Then they saw my staff and wand and immediately groveled, putting their heads to the dirt and mumbling something about *Per Ankh*—the House of Life.

"Um, yes," I said. "*Per Ankh* official business. Carry on. Bye."

Off I raced. I wondered if I would appear on a temple wall painting someday—a blond Egyptian girl with purple highlights running sideways through the palm trees, screaming "Yikes!" in

hieroglyphics as Neith chased after me. The thought of some poor archaeologist trying to figure that out almost lifted my spirits.

I reached the edge of the palm forest and stumbled to a stop. Before me, plowed fields spread into the distance. Nowhere to run or hide.

I turned back.

THUNK!

An arrow hit the nearest palm tree with such force that dates rained down on my head.

Walt, I thought desperately, *now, please.*

Twenty meters away, Neith rose from the grass. She had smeared river mud on her face. Palm fronds stuck from her hair like bunny ears.

"I've hunted feral pigs with more skill than you," she complained. "I've hunted *papyrus* plants with more skill!"

Now, Walt, I thought. *Dear, dear Walt. Now.*

Neith shook her head in disgust. She nocked an arrow. I felt a tugging sensation in my stomach, as if I were in a car and the driver suddenly slammed on the brakes.

I found myself sitting in a tree next to Walt, on the lowest bough of a large sycamore.

"It worked," he said.

Wonderful Walt!

I kissed him properly—or as properly as possible given our situation. There was a sweet smell about him I hadn't noticed before, as if he'd been eating lotus blossoms. I imagined that old school rhyme: "Walt and Sadie / sitting in a tree / K-I-S-S-I-N-G." Fortunately, anyone who might tease me was still five thousand years in the future.

Walt took a deep breath. "Is that a thank-you?"

"You look better," I noticed. His eyes weren't as yellow. He seemed to be moving with less pain. This should have delighted me, but instead it made me worried. "That lotus smell…did you drink something?"

"I'm okay." He looked away from me. "We'd better split up and try again."

That didn't make me any less worried, but he was right. We had no time to chat. We both jumped to the ground and headed off in opposite directions.

The sun was almost touching the horizon. I began to feel hopeful. Surely we wouldn't have to hold out much longer.

I almost stumbled into another macramé net, but fortunately I was on the lookout for Neith's arts and crafts projects. I sidestepped the trap, pushed through a stand of papyrus plants, and found myself back at Neith's temple.

The golden gates stood open. The wide avenue of sphinxes led straight into the complex. No guards…no priests. Maybe Neith had killed them all and collected their pockets, or perhaps they were all down in the bunker, preparing for a zombie invasion.

Hmm. I reckoned that the last place Neith might look for me was in her home base. Besides, Tawaret had seen Bes's shadow up on those ramparts. If I could find the shadow without Neith's help, all the better.

I ran for the gates, keeping a suspicious eye on the sphinxes. None of them came alive. Inside the massive courtyard were two freestanding obelisks tipped with gold. Between them glowered a statue of Neith in Ancient Egyptian garb. Shields and arrows had been piled around her feet like spoils of war.

I scanned the surrounding walls. Several stairways led up to the ramparts. The setting sun cast plenty of long shadows, but I didn't see any obvious dwarf silhouettes. Tawaret had suggested I call to the shadow. I was about to try when I heard Walt's voice in my mind: *Sadie!*

It's awfully hard to concentrate when someone's life depends on you.

I grasped the *shen* amulet and muttered, "Come on. Come on."

I pictured Walt standing next to me, preferably without an arrow in him. I blinked—and there he was. He almost knocked me down with a hug.

"She—she would've killed me," Walt gasped. "But she wanted to talk first. She said she liked our trick. She was proud to slay us and take our pockets."

"Super," I said. "Split up again?"

Walt glanced over my shoulder. "Sadie, look."

He pointed to the northwest corner of the walls, where a tower jutted from the ramparts. As the sky turned red, shadows slowly melted from the side of the tower, but one shadow remained—the silhouette of a stout little man with frizzy hair.

I'm afraid we forgot our plan. Together, we ran to the steps and climbed the wall. In no time, we were standing on the parapets, staring at the shadow of Bes.

I realized we must have been in the exact spot where Tawaret and Bes had held hands on the night Tawaret had described. Bes had told the truth—he'd left his shadow here so it could be happy, even when he wasn't.

"Oh, Bes…" My heart felt like it was shrinking into a wax *shabti*. "Walt, how do we capture it?"

A voice behind us said, "You don't."

We turned. A few meters away, Neith stood on the ramparts. Two arrows were nocked in her bow. At this range, I imagined she'd have no trouble hitting us both at once.

"A good try," she admitted. "But I always win the hunt."

SADIE

14. Fun with Split Personalities

AN EXCELLENT TIME TO CALL ON ISIS?

Perhaps. But even if Isis had answered, I doubted I could summon any magic faster than Neith could shoot. And on the off chance I actually defeated the huntress, I had the feeling Neith would consider it cheating if I used another goddess's power against her. She'd probably decide I was part of the Russian/zombie/tax collector conspiracy.

As mad as Neith was, we needed her help. She'd be much more useful shooting arrows at Apophis than sitting in her bunker making jackets out of our pockets and knotted twine.

My mind raced. How to win over a hunter? I didn't know much about hunters, except for old Major McNeil, Gramps's friend from the pensioners' home, who used to tell stories constantly about… Ah.

"It's a shame, really," I blurted out.

Neith hesitated, as I'd hoped she would.

"What is?" she asked.

"Six edible parts of a palm tree." I laughed. "It's seven actually."

Neith frowned. "Impossible!"

"Oh, yes?" I raised my eyebrows. "Have *you* ever lived off the land in Covent Garden? Have *you* ever trekked through the wilds of Camden Lock and lived to tell about it?"

Neith's bow dipped ever so slightly. "I do not know those places."

"I thought not!" I said triumphantly. "Oh, the stories we could've shared, Neith. The tips for survival. Once I went for a whole week on nothing but stale biscuits and the juice of the Ribena."

"Is that a plant?" Neith asked.

"With every nutrient you need for survival," I said. "If you know where to buy—I mean harvest it."

I lifted my wand, hoping she would see this as a dramatic move, not a threat. "Why once, in my bunker at Charing Cross Station, I stalked the deadly prey known as Jelly Babies."

Neith's eyes widened. "They are dangerous?"

"Horrible," I agreed. "Oh, they seem small alone, but they always appear in great numbers. Sticky, fattening—quite deadly. There I was, alone with only two quid and a Tube pass, beset by Jelly Babies, when… Ah, but never mind. When the Jelly Babies come for you…you will find out on your own."

She lowered her bow. “Tell me. I must know how to hunt Jelly Babies.”

I looked at Walt gravely. “How many months have I trained you, Walt?”

“Seven,” he said. “Almost eight.”

“And have I ever deemed you worthy of hunting Jelly Babies with me?”

“Uh…no.”

“There you have it!” I knelt and began tracing on the rampart floor with my wand. “Even Walt is not ready for such knowledge. I could draw for you here a picture of the dreaded Jelly Baby, or even—gods forbid!—the Jacob’s Digestive Cream. But that knowledge might destroy a lesser hunter.”

“I am the goddess of hunting!” Neith inched closer, staring in awe at the glowing markings—apparently not realizing I was making protective hieroglyphs. “I must know.”

“Well…” I glanced at the horizon. “First, you must understand the importance of timing.”

“Yes!” Neith said eagerly. “Tell me of this.”

“For instance…” I tapped the hieroglyphs and activated my spell. “It’s sunset. We’re still alive. We win.”

Neith’s expression hardened. “Trickery!”

She lunged at me, but the protective glyphs flared, pushing back the goddess. She raised her bow and shot her arrows.

What happened next was surprising on many levels. First, the arrows must have been heavily enchanted, because they sailed right through my defenses. Second, Walt lunged forward with impossible speed. Faster than I could scream (which I did), Walt snatched the arrows out of the air. They crumbled to gray dust, scattering in the wind.

Neith stepped back in horror. “It’s *you*. This is unfair!”

“We won,” Walt said. “Honor your agreement.”

A look passed between them that I didn’t quite understand—some sort of contest of wills.

Neith hissed through clenched teeth. “Very well. You may go. When Apophis rises, I will fight at your side. But I will not forget how you trespassed on my territory, child of Set. And you—”

She glared at me. “I lay this hunter’s curse upon you: someday you will be tricked by *your* prey as I have been tricked today. May you be set upon by a pack of wild Jelly Babies!”

With that terrifying threat, Neith dissolved into a pile of twine.

“Child of Set?” I narrowed my eyes at Walt. “What exactly—?”

“Look out!” he warned. All around us, the temple began to crumble. The air rippled as the magic shockwave contracted, transforming the landscape back to present-day Egypt.

We barely made it to the base of the stairs. The last walls of the temple were reduced to a pile of worn mud bricks, but the shadow of Bes was still visible against them, slowly fading as the sun went down.

“We need to hurry,” Walt said.

“Yes, but how do we capture it?”

Behind us, someone cleared his throat.

Anubis leaned against a nearby palm tree, his expression grim. “I’m sorry to intrude. But, Walt…

it's time."

Anubis was sporting the formal Egyptian look. He wore a golden neck collar, a black kilt, sandals, and pretty much nothing else. As I've mentioned before, not many boys could pull off this look, especially with kohl eyeliner, but Anubis managed.

Suddenly his expression turned to alarm. He sprinted toward us. For a moment I had an absurd vision of myself on the cover of one of Gran's old romance novels, where the damsel wilts into the arms of one half-dressed beefy guy while another stands by, casting her longing looks. Oh, the horrible choices a girl must make! I wished I'd had a moment to clean up. I was still covered in dried river muck, twine, and grass, like I'd been tarred and feathered.

Then Anubis pushed past me and gripped Walt's shoulders. Well…that was unexpected.

I quickly realized, however, that he'd stopped Walt from collapsing. Walt's face was beaded with sweat. His head drooped, and his knees gave out as if someone had cut the last string holding him together. Anubis lowered him gently to the ground.

"Walt, stay with me," Anubis urged. "We have business to finish."

"Business to finish?" I cried. I'm not sure what came over me, but I felt as if I'd just been Photoshopped out of my own book cover. And if there was one thing I wasn't used to, it was being ignored. "Anubis, what are you *doing* here? What is going on with you two? *And what bloody business?*"

Anubis frowned at me, as if he'd forgot my presence. That didn't do much to help my mood. "Sadie—"

"I tried to tell her," Walt groaned. Anubis helped him sit up, though Walt still looked awful.

"I see," Anubis said. "Couldn't get a word in edgewise, I guess?"

Walt managed a weak smile. "You should've seen her talking to Neith about Jelly Babies. She was like…I don't know, a verbal freight train. The goddess never stood a chance."

"Yes, I saw," Anubis said. "It was endearing, in an annoying sort of way."

"I beg your pardon?" I wasn't sure which of them to slap first.

"And when she turns red like that," Anubis added, as if I were some interesting specimen.

"Cute," Walt agreed.

"So have you decided?" Anubis asked him. "This is our last chance."

"Yes. I can't leave her."

Anubis nodded and squeezed his shoulder. "Neither can I. But the shadow, first?"

Walt coughed, his face contorting in pain. "Yes. Before it's too late."

I can't pretend I was thinking clearly, but one thing was obvious: these two had been talking behind my back *much* more than I'd realized. What on earth had they been telling each other about me? Forget Apophis swallowing the sun—*this* was my ultimate nightmare.

How could they *both* not leave me? Hearing that from a dying boy and a god of death sounded quite ominous. They'd formed some sort of conspiracy.…

Oh, lord. I was beginning to think like Neith. Soon I'd be huddled in an underground bunker eating army rations and cackling as I sewed together the pockets of all the boys who'd jilted me.

With difficulty, Anubis helped Walt over to the shadow of Bes, now rapidly disappearing in the twilight.

"Can you do it?" Anubis asked.

Walt murmured something I couldn't make out. His hands were shaking, but he pulled a block of wax from his bag and began kneading it into a *shabti*. "Setne tried to make it sound so complicated, but I see now. It's simple. No wonder the gods wanted this knowledge kept out of mortal hands."

"Excuse me," I interrupted.

They both looked at me.

"Hi, I'm Sadie Kane," I said. "I don't mean to barge in on your chummy conversation, but what in *blazes* are you doing?"

"Capturing Bes's shadow," Anubis told me.

"But…" I couldn't seem to make words come out. So much for being a verbal freight train. I'd become a verbal train wreck. "But if that's the business you were talking about, then what was all that about *deciding*, and *leaving me*, and—"

"Sadie," Walt said, "we're going to lose the shadow if I don't act now. You need to watch the spell, so you can do this with the shadow of the serpent."

"You are *not* going to die, Walt Stone. I forbid it."

"It's a simple incantation," he continued, quite ignoring my plea. "A regular summons, with the words *shadow of Bes* substituted for *Bes*. After the shadow is absorbed, you'll need a binding spell to anchor it. Then—"

"Walt, stop it!"

He was shivering so badly, his teeth chattered. How could he think about giving me a magic lesson now?

"—then for the execration," he said, "you'll need to be in front of Apophis. The ritual is exactly the same as normal. Setne lied about that part—there's nothing special about his enchantment. The only hard part is finding the shadow. For Bes, just reverse the spell. You should be able to cast it from a distance, since it's a beneficial spell. The shadow will *want* to help you. Send out the *sheut* to find Bes, and it should…should bring him back."

"But—"

"Sadie." Anubis put his arms around me. His brown eyes were full of compassion. "Don't make him talk more than he has to. He needs his strength for this spell."

Walt began to chant. He raised the lump of wax, which now resembled a miniature Bes, and pressed it against the shadow on the wall.

I sobbed. "But he'll die!"

Anubis held me. He smelled of temple incense—copal and amber and other ancient fragrances.

"He was born under the shadow of death," Anubis said. "That's why we understand each other. He would've collapsed long before now, but Jaz gave him one last potion to hold off the pain—to give him a final burst of energy in an emergency."

I remembered the sweet smell of lotus on Walt's breath. "He took it just now. When we were running from Neith."

Anubis nodded. “It’s worn off. He’ll only have enough energy to finish this spell.”

“No!” I meant to scream and hit him, but I’m afraid I rather melted and wept instead. Anubis sheltered me in his arms, and I sniveled like a little girl.

I have no excuse. I simply couldn’t stand the thought of losing Walt, even to bring back Bes. Just once, couldn’t I succeed at something without a massive sacrifice?

“You have to watch,” Anubis told me. “Learn the spell. It’s the only way to save Bes. And you’ll need the same enchantment to capture the serpent’s shadow.”

“I don’t care!” I cried, but I did watch.

As Walt chanted, the figurine absorbed the shadow of Bes like a sponge soaking up liquid. The wax turned as black as kohl.

“Don’t worry,” Anubis said gently. “Death won’t be the end for him.”

I pounded on his chest without much force. “I don’t want to hear that! You shouldn’t even be here. Didn’t the gods put a restraining order on you?”

“I’m not supposed to be near you,” Anubis agreed, “because I have no mortal form.”

“How, then? There’s no graveyard. This isn’t *your* temple.”

“No,” Anubis admitted. He nodded at Walt. “Look.”

Walt finished his spell. He spoke a single command word: *“Hi-nehm.”*

The hieroglyph for *Join together* blazed silver against the dark wax:

It was the same command I’d used to repair the gift shop in Dallas, the same command Uncle Amos had used last Christmas when he had demonstrated how to put a broken saucer back together. And with horrible certainty, I knew it would be the last spell Walt ever cast.

He slumped forward. I ran to his side. I cradled his head in my arms. His breathing was ragged.

“Worked,” he muttered. “Now…send the shadow to Bes. You’ll have to—”

“Walt, please,” I said. “We can get you to the First Nome. Their healers might be able to—”

“No, Sadie…” He pressed the figurine into my hands. “Hurry.”

I tried to concentrate. It was almost impossible, but I managed to reverse the wording of an execration. I channeled power into the figurine and imagined Bes as he once was. I urged the shadow to find its master, to reawaken his soul. Instead of erasing Bes from the world, I tried to draw him back into the picture, this time with permanent ink.

The wax statue turned to smoke and disappeared.

“Did—did it work?” I asked.

Walt didn’t answer. His eyes were closed. He lay perfectly still.

“Oh, please…no.” I hugged his forehead, which was rapidly cooling. “Anubis, do something!”

No answer. I turned, and Anubis was gone.

“Anubis!” I screamed so loudly it echoed off the distant cliffs. I set Walt down as gently as I could. I stood and turned in a full circle, my fists clenched. “That’s it?” I shouted at the empty air.

"You take his soul and leave? I *hate* you!"

Suddenly Walt gasped and opened his eyes.

I sobbed with relief.

"Walt!" I knelt next to him.

"The gate," he said urgently.

I didn't know what he meant. Perhaps he'd had some sort of near-death vision? His voice sounded clearer, free of pain, but still weak. "Sadie, hurry. You know the spell now. It will work on…on the serpent's shadow."

"Walt, what happened?" I brushed the tears from my face. "What gate?"

He pointed feebly. A few meters away, a door of darkness hovered in the air. "The whole quest was a trap," he said. "Setne…I see his plan now. Your brother needs your help."

"But what about you? Come with me!"

He shook his head. "I'm still too weak. I will do my best to summon reinforcements for you in the Duat—you'll need them—but I can barely move. I'll meet you at sunrise, at the First Nome, if—if you're sure you don't hate me."

"Hate you?" I was completely baffled. "Why on earth would I hate you?"

He smiled sadly—a smile that wasn't quite like him.

"Look," he said.

It took me a moment to understand his meaning. A cold feeling washed over me. How had Walt survived? Where was Anubis? And what had they been conspiring about?

Neith had called Walt a child of Set, but he wasn't. Set's only child was Anubis.

I tried to tell her, Walt had said.

He was born under the shadow of death, Anubis had told me. *That's why we understand each other.*

I didn't want to, but I lowered my vision into the Duat. Where Walt lay, I saw a different person, like a superimposed image…a young man lying weak and pale, in a gold neckband and black Egyptian kilt, with familiar brown eyes and a sad smile. Deeper still, I saw the glowing gray radiance of a god—the jackal-headed form of Anubis.

"Oh…no, no." I got up and stumbled away from him. From *them*. Too many puzzle pieces fell together at once. My head was spinning. Walt's ability to turn things to dust…it was the path of Anubis. He'd been channeling the god's power for months. Their friendship, their discussions, the *other* way Anubis hinted at for saving Walt…

"What have you done?" I stared at him in horror. I wasn't even sure what to call him.

"Sadie, it's me," Walt said. "Still me."

In the Duat, Anubis spoke in unison: "Still me."

"No!" My legs trembled. I felt betrayed and cheated. I felt as if the world was already crumbling into the Sea of Chaos.

"I can explain," he said in two voices. "But Carter needs your help. Please, Sadie—"

"Stop it!" I'm not proud of how I acted, but I turned and fled, leaping straight through the doorway of darkness. At the moment I didn't even care where it led, as long as it was away from that

deathless creature I had thought I loved.

CARTER

15. I Become a Purple Chimpanzee

JELLY BABIES? SERIOUSLY?

I hadn't heard that part. My sister never ceases to amaze me—[and no, Sadie, that's not a compliment, either.]

Anyway, while Sadie was having her supernatural guy drama, I was confronting an ax-murdering riverboat captain who apparently wanted to change his name to Even-More-Bloodstained Blade.

"Back down," I told the demon. "That's an order."

Bloodstained Blade made a humming sound that might've been laughter. He swung his head to the left—kind of an Elvis Presley dance move—and smashed a hole in the wall. Then he faced me again, splinters all over his shoulders.

"I have other orders," he hummed. "Orders to kill!"

He charged like a bull. After the mess we'd just been through in the *serapeum*, a bull was the last thing I wanted to deal with.

I thrust out my fist. *"Ha-wi!"*

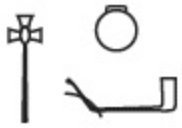
The hieroglyph for *Strike* glowed between us:

A blue fist of energy slammed into Bloodstained Blade, pushing him out the door and straight through the wall of the opposite stateroom. A hit like that would have knocked out a human, but I could hear BSB digging out from the rubble, humming angrily.

I tried to think. It would've been nice to keep smashing him with that hieroglyph over and over, but magic doesn't work that way. Once spoken, a divine word can't be used again for several minutes, sometimes even hours.

Besides, divine words are top-of-the-line magic. Some magicians spend years mastering a single hieroglyph. I'd learned the hard way that saying too many will burn through your energy really fast, and I didn't have much to spare.

First problem: keep the demon away from Zia. She was still half-conscious and totally defenseless. I summoned as much magic as I could and said: *"N'dah!"—Protect.*



Blue light shimmered around her. I had a horrible flashback to when I found Zia in her watery tomb last spring. If she woke up encased in blue energy and thought she was imprisoned again…

"Oh, Zia," I said, "I didn't mean—"

"KILL!" Bloodstained Blade rose from the wreckage of the opposite room. A feather pillow was impaled on his head, raining goose fluff all over his uniform.

I dashed into the hall and headed for the stairs, glancing back to be sure the captain was following me and not going after Zia. Lucky me—he was right on my tail.

I reached the deck and yelled, "Setne!"

The ghost was nowhere to be seen. The crew lights were going crazy, buzzing around frantically, bonking into walls, looping around the smokestacks, lowering and raising the gangplank for no apparent reason. I guess without Bloodstained Blade to give them directions, they were lost.

The riverboat careened down the River of Night, weaving drunkenly in the current. We slipped between two jagged rocks that would have pulverized the hull, then dropped over a cataract with a jaw-rattling *thunk*. I glanced up at the wheelhouse and saw no one steering. It was a miracle that we hadn't crashed already. I had to get the boat under control.

I ran for the stairs.

When I was halfway there, Bloodstained Blade appeared out of nowhere. He sliced his head across my gut, ripping open my shirt. If I'd had a larger belly—no, I don't want to think about it. I stumbled backward, pressing my hand against my navel. He'd only grazed the skin, but the sight of blood on my fingers made me feel faint.

Some warrior, I scolded myself.

Fortunately, Bloodstained Blade had embedded his ax head in the wall. He was still trying to tug it free, grumbling, "New orders: *Kill Carter Kane. Take him to the Land of Demons. Make sure it's a one-way trip.*"

The Land of Demons?

I bolted up the stairs and into the wheelhouse.

All around the boat, the river churned into whitewater rapids. A pillar of stone loomed out of the fog and scraped against our starboard side, ripping off part of the railing. We twisted sideways and picked up speed. Somewhere ahead of us, I heard the roar of millions of tons of water cascading into oblivion. We were rushing toward a waterfall.

I looked around desperately for the shore. It was hard to see through the thick fog and gloomy gray light of the Duat, but a hundred yards or so off the bow, I thought I saw fires burning, and a dark line that might've been a beach.

The Land of Demons sounded bad, but not as bad as dropping off a waterfall and getting smashed to pieces. I ripped the cord off the alarm bell and lashed the pilot's wheel in place, pointing us toward the shore.

"Kill Kane!"

The captain's well-polished boot slammed me in the ribs and sent me straight through the port window. Glass shattered, raking my back and legs. I bounced off a hot smokestack and landed hard on the deck.

My vision blurred. The cut across my stomach stung. My legs felt like they'd been used for a tiger's chew toy, and judging from the hot pain in my side, I may have broken some ribs in the fall.

All in all, not my best combat experience.

Hello? Horus spoke in my mind. *Any intention of calling for help, or are you happy to die on your own?*

Yeah, I snapped back at him. *The sarcasm is real helpful.*

Truthfully, I didn't think I had enough energy left to summon my avatar, even with Horus's help. My fight with the Apis Bull had nearly tapped me out, and that was before I got chased by an ax demon and kicked out a window.

I could hear Bloodstained Blade stomping his way back down the stairs. I tried to rise, and almost blacked out from the pain.

A weapon, I told Horus. *I need a weapon.*

I reached into the Duat and pulled out an ostrich feather.

"Really?" I yelled.

Horus didn't answer.

Meanwhile the crew lights zipped around in a panic as the boat barreled toward the shore. The beach was easier to see now—black sand littered with bones and plumes of volcanic gas shooting from fiery crevices. Oh, good. Just the sort of place I wanted to crash land.

I dropped the ostrich feather and reached into the Duat again.

This time I pulled out a pair of familiar weapons—the crook and flail, symbols of the pharaoh. The crook was a gold-and-red shepherd's rod with a curved end. The flail was a pole arm with three wicked-looking spiked chains. I'd seen lots of similar weapons. Every pharaoh had a set. But *these* looked disturbingly like the original pair—the weapons of the sun god that I'd found last spring buried in Zia's tomb.

"What are these doing here?" I demanded. "These should be with Ra."

Horus remained silent. I got the feeling he was as surprised as I was.

Bloodstained Blade stormed around the side of the wheelhouse. His uniform was ripped and covered in feathers. His blades had some new nicks, and he'd gotten the emergency bell wrapped around his left boot so it clanged as he walked. But he still looked better than me.

"Enough," he hummed. "I have served the Kanes too long!"

Toward the bow of the ship, I heard the *crank, crank, crank* of the gangplank lowering. I glanced over and saw Setne strolling calmly across as the river churned beneath him. He stopped at the edge of the plank and waited as the boat raced toward the black sand beach. He was preparing to jump to safety. And tucked under his arm was a large papyrus scroll—the Book of Thoth.

"Setne!" I screamed.

He turned and waved, smiling pleasantly. "It'll be fine, Carter! I'll be right back!"

"Tas!" I yelled.

Instantly the Ribbons of Hathor encased him, scroll and all, and Setne pitched overboard into the water.

I hadn't planned on that, but I didn't have time to worry about it. Bloodstained Blade charged, his left foot going *clump, BONG!, clump, BONG!* I rolled sideways as his ax head cut the floor, but he recovered more quickly than I could. My ribs felt like they'd been dipped in acid. My arm was too weak to lift Ra's flail. I raised the crook for defense, but I had no idea how to use it.

Bloodstained Blade loomed over me, humming with evil glee. I knew I couldn't evade another attack. I was about to become two separate halves of Carter Kane.

"We are done!" he bellowed.

Suddenly, he erupted in a column of fire. His body vaporized. His metal ax head dropped, impaling itself in the deck between my feet.

I blinked, wondering if this was some sort of demon trick, but Bloodstained Blade was truly and completely gone. Beside the ax head, all that remained were his polished boots, a slightly melted alarm bell, and some charred goose feathers floating in the air.

A few feet away, Zia leaned against the wheelhouse. Her right hand was wrapped in flames.

"Yes," Zia muttered to the smoking ax blade. "We're done."

She extinguished her fire, then stumbled over and embraced me. I was so relieved I could almost ignore the searing pain in my side.

"You're okay," I said, which sounded dumb under the circumstances, but she rewarded me with a smile.

"Fine," she said. "Had a moment of panic. Woke up with blue energy all around me, but—"

I happened to glance behind her, and my stomach turned inside out.

"Hold on!" I yelled.

The *Egyptian Queen* rammed into the shore at full speed.

I now understand the whole thing about wearing seat belts.

Hanging on did absolutely no good. The boat ran aground with such force, Zia and I shot into the air like human cannonballs. The hull cracked apart behind us with an almighty *ka-blam!* The landscape hurtled toward my face. I had half a second to contemplate whether I would die by smacking into the ground or falling into a flaming crevice. Then, from above me, Zia grabbed my arm and hoisted me skyward.

I caught a glimpse of her, grim-faced and determined, holding on to me with one hand and hanging from the talons of a giant vulture with the other. Her amulet. I hadn't thought about it in months, but Zia had a vulture amulet. She'd somehow managed to activate it, because she's just awesome that way.

Unfortunately, the vulture wasn't strong enough to hold two people aloft. It could only slow our fall, so instead of being smashed flat, Zia and I rolled hard against the black sandy soil, tumbling over each other right to the edge of a fiery crevice.

My chest felt like it had been stomped flat. Every muscle in my body ached, and I had double vision. But to my amazement, the sun god's crook and flail were clasped tightly in my right hand. I hadn't even realized I still had them.

Zia must've been in better shape than me (of course, I'd seen roadkill in better shape than me). She found the strength to drag me away from the fissure and down toward the beach.

"Ouch," I said.

"Lie still." She spoke a command word, and her vulture shrank back into a charm. She rummaged through her backpack.

She brought out a small ceramic jar and began rubbing blue paste on the cuts, burns, and bruises that covered my upper body. The pain in my side eased immediately. The wounds disappeared. Zia's hands were smooth and warm. The magical unguent smelled like blossoming honeysuckle. It wasn't the worst experience I'd had all day.

She scooped another dollop of salve and looked at the long cut across my stomach. "Um…you should do this part."

She scraped the salve onto my fingers and let me apply it. The gash mended. I sat up slowly and took care of the glass cuts on my legs. Inside my chest, I swear I could feel my ribs mending. I took a deep breath and was relieved to find it didn't hurt.

"Thank you," I said. "What is that stuff?"

"Nefertem's Balm," she said.

"It's a bomb?"

Her laughter made me feel almost as good as the salve. "*Healing* balm, Carter. It's made of blue lotus flower, coriander, mandrake, ground malachite, and a few other special ingredients. Very rare, and this is my only jar. So don't get injured anymore."

"Yes, ma'am."

I was pleased that my head had stopped spinning. My double vision was returning to normal.

The *Egyptian Queen* wasn't in such good shape. The remains of the hull were scattered across the beach—boards and railings, ropes and glass, mixed with the bones that had already been there. The wheelhouse had imploded. Fire curled from the broken windows. The fallen smokestacks bubbled golden smoke into the river.

As we watched, the stern cracked off and slid underwater, dragging the glowing orbs of light with it. Maybe the magical crew was bound to the boat. Maybe they weren't even alive. But I still felt sorry for them as they disappeared under the murky surface.

"We won't be going back that way," I said.

"No," Zia agreed. "Where are we? What happened to Setne?"

Setne. I'd almost forgotten about that ghostly scumbag. I would've been fine with his sinking to the bottom of the river, except that he'd taken the Book of Thoth.

I scanned the beach. To my surprise, I spotted a slightly battered pink mummy about twenty yards down the shore, squirming and struggling through the flotsam, apparently trying to inchworm his way to freedom.

I pointed him out to Zia. "We could leave him like that, but he's got the Book of Thoth."

She gave me one of those cruel smiles that made me glad she wasn't my enemy. "No hurry. He won't get far. How about a picnic?"

"I like the way you think."

We spread out our supplies and tried to clean up as best we could. I busted out some bottled water and protein bars—yeah, look at me, the Boy Scout.

We ate and drank and watched our gift-wrapped pink ghost try to crawl away.

"How did we get here, exactly?" Zia asked. Her golden scarab still glittered at her throat. "I remember the *serapeum*, the Apis Bull, the room with the sunlight. After that, it's fuzzy."

I described what had happened as best I could—her magic scarab shield, her suddenly awesome powers from Khepri, the way she'd fried the Apis Bull and almost combusted herself. I explained how I'd gotten her back to the ship, and how Bloodstained Blade had turned psycho.

Zia winced. "You granted Setne permission to give Bloodstained Blade orders?"

"Yeah. Maybe not my best idea."

"And he brought us here—to the Land of Demons, the most dangerous part of the Duat."

I'd heard of the Land of Demons, but I didn't know much about it. At the moment, I didn't want to learn. I'd already escaped death so many times today, I just wanted to sit here, rest, and talk with Zia—and maybe enjoy watching Setne struggle to get somewhere in his cocoon.

"You, uh, feeling okay?" I asked Zia. "I mean, about the stuff with the sun god…"

She gazed across the pitted landscape of black sand, bones, and fire. Not many people can look good in the light of superheated volcanic gas plumes. Zia managed.

"Carter, I wanted to tell you, but I didn't understand what was happening to me. I was frightened."

"It's okay," I said. "I was the Eye of Horus. I understand."

Zia pursed her lips. "Ra is different, though. He's much older, much more dangerous to channel. And he's trapped in that old husk of a body. He can't restart his cycle of rebirth."

"That's why he needs you," I guessed. "He woke up talking about *zebras*—you. He offered you that scarab when he first met you. He wants you to be his host."

A crevice spewed fire. The reflection in Zia's eyes reminded me of how she'd looked when she merged with Khepri—her pupils filled with orange flames.

"When I was entombed in that…that sarcophagus," Zia said, "I almost lost my mind, Carter. I still have nightmares. And when I tap into Ra's power, I have the same sense of panic. He feels imprisoned, helpless. Reaching out to him is like…it's like trying to save somebody who's drowning. They grab on to you and take you down with them." Zia shook her head. "Maybe that doesn't make sense. But his power tries to escape through me, and I can barely control it. Every time I black out, it gets worse."

"Every time?" I said. "Then you've blacked out before?"

She explained what had happened in the House of Rest when she'd tried to destroy the nursing home with her fireballs. Just a minor little detail Sadie forgot to tell me.

"Ra is too powerful," she said. "I'm too weak to control him. In the catacombs with the Apis Bull, I might've killed you."

"But you didn't," I said. "You saved my life—*again*. I know it's hard, but you can control the power. Ra needs to break out of his prison. The whole shadow magic idea that Sadie wants to try with Bes? I get the feeling that won't work with Ra. The sun god needs *rebirth*. You understand what that's like. I think that's why he gave you Khepri, the rising sun." I pointed to her scarab amulet.

"You're the key to bringing him back."

Zia took a bite of her protein bar. "This tastes like Styrofoam."

"Yeah," I admitted. "Not as good as Macho Nachos. I still owe you that date at the mall food court."

She laughed weakly. "I wish we could do that right now."

"Usually girls aren't so eager to go out with me. Um…not that I've ever asked—"

She leaned over and kissed me.

I'd imagined this many times, but I was so unprepared, I didn't act very cool about it. I dropped my protein bar and breathed in her cinnamon fragrance. When she pulled away, I was gaping like a fish. I said something like "Hum-uh-huh."

"You are kind, Carter," she said. "And funny. And despite the fact you were just pushed out a window and hurled from an explosion, you're even handsome. You've also been very patient with me. But I'm afraid. I've never been able to hold on to anyone I cared about—my parents, Iskandar.… If I'm too weak to control the power of Ra and I end up hurting you—"

"No," I said immediately. "No, you won't, Zia. Ra didn't choose you because you're weak. He chose you because you're strong. And, um…" I looked down at the crook and flail lying at my side. "These just sort of appeared.… I think they showed up for a reason. You should take them."

I tried to hand them over, but she curled my fingers around them.

"Keep them," she said. "You're right: they didn't appear by accident, but they appeared in *your* hands. They may be Ra's, but Horus must be pharaoh."

The weapons seemed to heat up, or maybe that was because Zia was holding my hands. The idea of using the crook and flail made me nervous. I'd lost my *khopesh*—the sword used by the pharaoh's guards—and gained the weapons of the pharaoh himself. Not just any pharaoh, either…I was holding the implements of Ra, the first king of the gods.

Me, Carter Kane, a homeschooled fifteen-year-old who was still learning how to shave and could barely dress himself for a school dance—somehow I'd been deemed worthy of the most powerful magic weapons in creation.

"How can you be sure?" I asked. "How could these be for me?"

Zia smiled. "Maybe I'm getting better at understanding Ra. He needs Horus's support. I need you."

I tried to think of what to say, and whether I had the nerve to ask for another kiss. I'd never pictured my first date being on a bone-littered riverbank in the Land of Demons, but at that moment there was no place I'd rather be.

Then I heard a *bonk*—the sound of someone's head hitting a thick piece of wood. Setne let out a muffled curse. He'd managed to inchworm himself right into a broken section of keel. Dazed and off-balance, he rolled into the water and started to sink.

"We'd better fish him out," I said.

"Yes," Zia agreed. "We don't want the Book of Thoth to get damaged."

We hauled Setne onto the beach. Zia carefully dispelled just the ribbons around his chest so she could pull the Book of Thoth out from under his arm. Thankfully, the papyrus scroll appeared intact.

Setne said, "Mmm-hmmpfh!"

"Sorry, not interested," I said. "We've got the book, so we'll be leaving you now. I don't feel like being stabbed in the back anymore or listening to your lies."

Setne rolled his eyes. He shook his head vigorously, mumbling what was probably a very good explanation of why he'd been within his rights to turn my demon servant against me.

Zia opened the scroll and studied the writing. After a few lines, she began to frown. "Carter, this is…really dangerous stuff. I'm only skimming, but I see descriptions of the gods' secret palaces, spells to make them reveal their true names, information on how to recognize all the gods no matter what form they try to take…"

She looked up fearfully. "With knowledge like this, Setne could have caused *a lot* of damage. The only good thing…as far as I can tell, most of these spells can only be used by a living magician. A ghost wouldn't be able to cast them."

"Maybe that's why he kept us alive this long," I said. "He needed our help to get the book. Then he planned on tricking us into casting the spells he wanted."

Setne mumbled in protest.

"Can we find Apophis's shadow without him?" I asked Zia.

"Mm-mm!" Setne said, but I ignored him.

Zia studied a few more lines. "Apophis…the *sheut* of Apophis. Yes, here it is. It lies in the Land of Demons. So we're in the right place. But this map…" She showed me part of the scroll, which was so dense with hieroglyphs and pictures, I couldn't even tell it *was* a map. "I have no idea how to read it. The Land of Demons is huge. From what I've read, it's constantly shifting, breaking apart, and reforming. And it's full of demons."

"Imagine that." I tried to swallow the bitter taste from my mouth. "So we'll be as out-of-place here as demons are in the mortal world. We won't be able to go anywhere unseen, and everything that meets us will want to kill us."

"Yes," Zia agreed. "And we're running out of time."

She was right. I didn't know exactly what time it was in the mortal world, but we had descended into the Duat in the late afternoon. By now, the sun might have gone down. Walt wasn't supposed to survive past sunset. For all I knew, he might be dying right now, and my poor sister… No. It was too painful to think about.

But at dawn tomorrow, Apophis would rise. The rebel magicians would attack the First Nome. We didn't have the luxury to roam around a hostile land, fighting everything in our path until we found what we were looking for.

I glared down at Setne. "I'm guessing you can guide us to the shadow."

He nodded.

I turned to Zia. "If he does or says anything you don't like, incinerate him."

"With pleasure."

I commanded the ribbons to release just his mouth.

"Holy Horus, pal!" he complained. "Why did you tie me up?"

"Well, let's see…maybe because you tried to get me *killed*?"

"Aw, that?" Setne sighed. "Look, pal, if you're going to overreact every time I try to kill you—"

"Overreact?" Zia summoned a white-hot fireball into her hand.

"Okay, okay!" Setne said. "Look, that demon captain was going to turn on you anyway. I just helped things along. And I did it for a reason! We needed to get here, to the Land of Demons, right? Your captain would never have agreed to set that course unless he thought he could kill you. This is his homeland! Demons don't *ever* bring mortals here unless they're for snacks."

I had to remember Setne was a master liar. Whatever he told me was complete and utter Apis-quality bull. I steeled my willpower against his words, but it was still difficult not to find them reasonable.

"So you were going to let Bloodstained Blade kill me," I said, "but it was for a good cause."

"Aw, I knew you could take him," Setne said.

Zia held up the scroll. "And that's why you were running away with the Book of Thoth?"

"Running? I was going to scout ahead! I wanted to find the shadow so I could lead you there! But that's not important. If you let me go, I can still bring you to the shadow of Apophis, and I can get you there unseen."

"How?" Zia asked.

Setne sniffed indignantly. "I've been practicing magic since your ancestors were in diapers, doll. And while it's true I can't do all the mortal spells I'd like…" He glanced wistfully at the Book of Thoth. "I *have* picked up some tricks only ghosts can do. Untie me and I'll show you."

I looked at Zia. I could tell we were thinking the same thing: terrible idea, but we didn't have a better one.

"I can't believe we're seriously considering this," she grumbled.

Setne grinned. "Hey, you're being smart. This is your best shot. Besides, I *want* you to succeed! Like I said, I don't want Apophis destroying *me*. You won't regret it."

"I'm pretty sure I will." I snapped my fingers, and the Ribbons of Hathor unraveled.

Setne's brilliant plan? He turned us into demons.

Well, okay…it was actually just a glamor, so we *looked* like demons, but it was the best illusion magic I'd ever seen.

Zia took one look at me and started to giggle. I couldn't see my own face, but she told me I now had a massive bottle opener for a head. I *did* notice that my skin was fuchsia, and I had hairy bowed legs like a chimpanzee.

I didn't blame Zia for laughing, but she didn't look much better. She was now a big muscular girl demon with bright green skin, a zebra-hide dress, and the head of a piranha.

"Perfect," Setne said. "You'll blend right in."

"What about you?" I asked.

He spread his hands. He was still wearing his jeans, white sneakers, and black jacket. His diamond pinky rings and gold *ankh* chain flashed in the volcanic firelight. The only difference was that his red T-shirt now read: GO, DEMONS!

"You can't improve on perfection, pal. This outfit works anywhere. The demons won't even bat

an eye—assuming they have eyes. Now, come on!"

He drifted inland, not waiting to see if we would follow.

Every once in a while, Setne checked the Book of Thoth for directions. He explained that the shadow would be impossible to find in this moving landscape without consulting the book, which served as a combination compass, tourist's guide, and Farmer's Almanac timetable.

He promised us it would be a short journey, but it seemed pretty long to me. Any more time in Demon Land, and I'm not sure I would have come out sane. The landscape was like an optical illusion. We spotted a vast mountain range in the distance, then walked fifty feet and discovered the mountains were so tiny, we could jump over them. I stepped into a small puddle and suddenly found myself drowning in a flooded sinkhole fifty feet wide. Huge Egyptian temples crumbled and rearranged themselves as if some invisible giant were playing with blocks. Limestone cliffs erupted out of nowhere, already carved with monumental statues of grotesque monsters. The stone faces turned and watched us as we passed.

Then there were the demons. I'd seen lots of them under Camelback Mountain, where Set built his red pyramid, but here in their native environment, they were even larger and more horrible. Some looked like torture victims, with gaping wounds and twisted limbs. Others had insect wings, or multiple arms, or tentacles made from darkness. As for their heads, pretty much every zoo animal and Swiss Army knife attachment was well represented.

The demons roamed in hordes across the dark landscape. Some built fortresses. Others tore them down. We saw at least a dozen large-scale battles. Winged demons circled through the smoky air, occasionally snatching up unsuspecting smaller monsters and carrying them off.

But none of them bothered us.

As we stumbled along, I became more and more aware of the presence of Chaos. A cold churning started in my gut, spreading through my limbs like my blood cells were turning to ice. I'd felt this before at the prison of Apophis, when Chaos sickness had almost killed me, but this place seemed even more poisonous.

After a while, I realized everything in the Land of Demons was being pulled in the direction we were traveling. The whole landscape was bending and crumbling, the fabric of matter unweaving. I knew the same force was pulling at the molecules of my body.

Zia and I should have died. But as bad as the cold and the nausea were, I sensed that they should have been worse. Something was protecting us, an invisible layer of warmth keeping the Chaos at bay.

It is her, said the voice of Horus, with grudging respect. *Ra sustains us.*

I looked at Zia. She still appeared to be a piranha-headed green she-demon, but the air around her shimmered like vapor off a hot road.

Setne kept glancing back. Each time, he seemed surprised to find us still alive. But he shrugged and kept going.

The demons became fewer and farther between. The landscape got even more twisted. Rock formations, sand dunes, dead trees, even pillars of fire all leaned toward the horizon.

We came to a cratered field, peppered with what looked like huge black lotus blossoms. They rose up quickly, spread their petals, and burst. Only when we got closer did I realize they were knots of shadowy tendrils, like Sadie had described at the Brooklyn Academy dance. Each time one burst, it

spit out a spirit that had been dragged from the upper world. These ghosts, no more than pale bits of mist, clawed desperately for something to anchor them, but they were quickly dispersed and sucked away in the same direction we were traveling.

Zia frowned at Setne. "You're not affected?"

The ghost magician turned. For once his expression was grim. His color was paler, his clothes and jewelry bleached out. "Let's just keep moving, huh? I hate this place."

I froze. Ahead of us stood a cliff I recognized—the same one I'd seen in the vision Apophis had shown me. Except now there were no spirits huddled in its shelter.

"My mother was there," I said.

Zia seemed to understand. She took my hand. "It might be a different cliff. The landscape is always changing."

Somehow I knew it was the same place. I had the feeling Apophis had left it intact just to taunt me.

Setne twisted his pinky rings. "The serpent's shadow feeds on spirits, pal. None of them last long. If your mom was here—"

"She was strong," I insisted. "A magician, like you. If you can fight it, she could too."

Setne hesitated. Then he shrugged. "Sure, pal. We're close now. Better keep going."

Soon I heard a roar in the distance. The horizon glowed red. We seemed to be moving faster, as if we'd stepped on an automated walkway.

Then we came over the crest of a hill, and I saw our destination.

"There you go," Setne said. "The Sea of Chaos."

Before us spread an ocean of mist, fire, or water—it was impossible to tell which. Grayish-red matter churned, boiling and smoking, surging just like my stomach. It stretched as far as I could see—and something told me it had no end.

The ocean's edge wasn't so much a beach as a reverse waterfall. Solid ground poured into the sea and disappeared. A house-sized boulder trundled over the hill to our right, slid down the beach, and dissolved in the surf. Chunks of solid ground, trees, buildings, and statues constantly flew over our heads and sailed into the ocean, vaporizing as they touched the waves. Even the demons weren't immune. A few winged ones strayed over the beach, realized too late that they'd flown too close, and disappeared screaming into the swirling misty soup.

It was pulling us, too. Instead of walking forward, I was instinctively backpedaling now, just to stay in one place. If we got any closer, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to stop.

Only one thing gave me hope. A few hundred yards to the north, jutting into the waves, was a single solid strip of land like a jetty. At the far end rose a white obelisk like the Washington Monument. The spire glowed with light. I had a feeling it was ancient—even older than the gods. As beautiful as the obelisk was, I couldn't help thinking of Cleopatra's Needle on the banks of the River Thames, where my mother had died.

"We can't go down there," I said.

Setne laughed. "The Sea of Chaos? That's where we all came from, pal. Haven't you heard how Egypt was formed?"

"It rose from this sea," Zia said, almost in a trance. "Ma'at appeared from Chaos—the first land,

creation from destruction."

"Yep," Setne said. "The two great forces of the universe. And there they are."

"That obelisk is…the first land?" I asked.

"Dunno," Setne said. "I wasn't there. But it's the *symbol* of Ma'at, for sure. Everything else, that's Apophis's power, always chewing away at creation, always eating and destroying. You tell me, which force is more powerful?"

I tried to swallow. "Where is Apophis's shadow?"

Setne chuckled. "Oh, it's here. But to see it, to catch it, you'll have to cast the spell from out there—at the edge of the jetty."

"We'll never make it," Zia said. "One false step—"

"Sure," Setne agreed cheerfully. "It'll be fun!"

16. Sadie Rides Shotgun (Worst. Idea. Ever.)

HERE'S SOME FREE ADVICE: Don't walk toward Chaos.

With every step, I felt like I was being dragged into a black hole. Trees, boulders, and demons flew past us and were sucked into the ocean, while lightning flickered through the red-gray mist. Under our feet, chunks of the ground kept cracking and sliding into the tide.

I grasped the crook and flail in one hand and held Zia's hand with the other. Setne whistled and floated along beside us. He tried to act cool, but from the way his colors were fading and his greased hair pointed toward the ocean like a comet's tail, I figured he was having a tough time holding his ground.

Once I lost my balance. I almost tumbled into the surf, but Zia pulled me back. A few steps later, a fish-headed demon flew out of nowhere and slammed into me. He grabbed my leg, trying desperately to avoid getting sucked in. Before I could decide whether or not to help him, he lost his grip and disappeared into the sea.

The most horrible thing about the journey? Part of me was tempted to give up and let Chaos draw me in. Why keep struggling? Why not end the pain and the worry? So what, if Carter Kane dissolved into trillions of molecules?

I knew those thoughts weren't really mine. The voice of Apophis was whispering in my head, tempting me as it had before. I concentrated on the glowing white obelisk—our lighthouse in the storm of Chaos. I didn't know if that spire was really the first part of creation, or how that myth jibed with the Big Bang, or with God creating the world in seven days, or whatever else people might believe. Maybe the obelisk was just a manifestation of something larger—something my mind couldn't comprehend. Whatever the case, I knew the obelisk stood for Ma'at, and I had to focus on it. Otherwise I was lost.

We reached the base of the jetty. The rocky path felt reassuringly solid under my feet, but the pull of Chaos was strong on either side. As we inched forward, I remembered photos I'd seen of construction workers building skyscrapers back in the old days, fearlessly walking across girders six hundred feet in the air with no safety harnesses.

I felt like that now, except I wasn't fearless. The winds buffeted me. The jetty was ten feet wide, but I still felt like I was going to lose my balance and pitch into the waves. I tried not to look down. The stuff of Chaos churned and crashed against the rocks. It smelled like ozone, car exhaust, and formaldehyde mixed together. The fumes alone were almost enough to make me pass out.

"Just a little farther," Setne said.

His form flickered unevenly. Zia's green demon disguise blinked in and out. I held up my arm

and saw my glamor shimmering in the wind, threatening to collapse. I didn't mind losing the shocking-purple bottle-opening chimp look, but I hoped the wind would tear away only the illusion, not my actual skin.

Finally, we reached the obelisk. It was carved with tiny hieroglyphs, thousands of them, white on white, so they were almost impossible to read. I spotted the names of gods, enchantments to invoke Ma'at, and some divine words so powerful, they almost blinded me. Around us, the Sea of Chaos heaved. Each time the wind blew, a glowing shield in the shape of a scarab flickered around Zia—the magical carapace of Khepri, sheltering us all. I suspected it was the only thing keeping us from instant death.

"What now?" I asked.

"Read the spell," Setne said. "You'll see."

Zia handed me the scroll. I tried to find the right lines, but I couldn't see straight. The glyphs blurred together. I should have anticipated this problem. Even when I *wasn't* standing next to the Sea of Chaos, I'd never been good at incantations. I wished Sadie were there.

[Yes, Sadie. I actually said that. Don't gasp so loud.]

"I—I can't read it," I admitted.

"Let me help." Zia traced her finger down the scroll. When she found the hieroglyphs she wanted, she frowned.

"This is a simple summoning spell." She glared at Setne. "You said the magic was complicated. You said we'd need your help. How could you lie while holding the Feather of Truth?"

"I didn't lie!" Setne protested. "The magic *is* complicated for me. I'm a ghost! Some spells—like summoning spells—I can't cast at all. And you *did* need my help to find the shadow. You needed the Book of Thoth for that, and you needed me to interpret it. Otherwise, you'd still be shipwrecked at the river."

I hated to admit it, but I said, "He's got a point."

"Sure I do," Setne said. "Now that you're here, the rest isn't so bad. Just force the shadow to show itself, and then I—er—you can capture it."

Zia and I exchanged a nervous look. I imagined she felt the same way I did. Standing at the edge of creation, facing an endless Sea of Chaos, the *last* thing I wanted to do was cast a spell that would summon part of Apophis's soul. It was like shooting off a flare gun, signaling, *Hey, big nasty shadow! Here we are! Come and kill us!*

I didn't see that we had much choice, though.

Zia did the honors. It was an easy invocation, the kind a magician might use to summon a *shabti*, or an enchanted dust mop, or pretty much any minor creature from the Duat.

When Zia finished, a tremor spread in all directions, as if she'd dropped a massive stone into the Sea of Chaos. The disturbance rippled up the beach and over the hills.

"Um…what was that?" I asked.

"Distress signal," Setne said. "I'm guessing the shadow just called on the forces of Chaos to protect it."

"Wonderful," I said. "We'd better hurry, then. Where's the—? Oh…"

The *sheut* of Apophis was so large, it took me a moment to understand what I was looking at.

The white obelisk seemed to cast a shadow across the sea; but as the shadow darkened, I realized that it wasn't the silhouette of the obelisk. Rather, the shadow writhed across the surface of the water like the body of a giant snake. The shadow grew until the head of the serpent almost reached the horizon. It lashed across the sea, darting its tongue, and biting at nothing.

My hands shook. My insides felt like I'd just chugged a big glass of Chaos water. The serpent's shadow was so massive, radiating so much power, that I didn't see how we could possibly capture it. What had I been thinking?

Only one thing kept me from total panic.

The serpent wasn't completely free. Its tail seemed to be anchored to the obelisk, as if someone had driven a spike to keep it from escaping.

For a disturbing moment, I felt the serpent's thoughts. I saw things from Apophis's point of view. It was trapped by the white obelisk—seething and in pain. It hated the world of mortals and gods, which pinned it down and constricted its freedom. Apophis despised creation the way I might despise a rusty nail driven through my foot, keeping me from walking.

All Apophis wanted was to snuff out the obelisk's blinding light. He wanted to annihilate the earth, so he could go back to the darkness and swim forever in the unrestricted expanses of Chaos. It took all of my willpower not to feel sorry for the poor little world-destroying, sun-devouring serpent.

"Well," I said hoarsely. "We found the shadow. Now what do we do with it?"

Setne chuckled. "Oh, I can take it from here. You guys did great. *Tas!*"

If I hadn't been so distracted, I might have seen what was coming, but I didn't. My demon glamor suddenly turned into solid bands of mummy linen, covering my mouth first, then wrapping around my body with blinding speed. I toppled and fell, completely encased except for my eyes. Zia hit the rocks next to me, also cocooned. I tried to breathe, but it was like inhaling through a pillow.

Setne leaned over Zia. He carefully extracted the Book of Thoth from beneath her bindings and tucked it under his arm. Then he smiled down at me.

"Oh, Carter, Carter." He shook his head as if he were mildly disappointed. "I like you, pal. I really do. But you are *way* too trusting. After that business on the riverboat, you *still* gave me permission to cast a glamor spell on you? Come on! Changing a glamor into a straitjacket is *sooo* easy."

"Mmm!" I grunted.

"What's that?" Setne cupped his ear. "Hard to talk when you're all bound up, isn't it? Look, it's nothing personal. I couldn't cast that invocation spell myself, or I would have done it ages ago. I needed you two! Well…one of you, anyway. I figured I'd be able to kill either you or your girlfriend along the way, make the other one easier for me to handle. I never thought *both* of you would survive this far. Impressive!"

I wriggled and almost toppled into the water. For some reason, Setne pulled me back to safety.

"Now, now," he chided. "No point killing yourself, pal. Your plan isn't ruined. I'm just going to alter it. I'll trap the shadow. That part I can do myself! But instead of casting the execration, I'll blackmail Apophis, see? He'll destroy only what I *let* him destroy. Then he retreats back into Chaos, or his shadow gets stomped, and the big snake goes bye-bye."

"Mmm!" I protested, but it was getting harder to breathe.

"Yeah, yeah." Setne sighed. "This is the part where you say, 'You're mad, Setne! You'll never get away with it!' But the thing is, I will. I've been getting away with impossible stuff for thousands of years. I'm sure the snake and I can come to a deal. Oh, I'll let him kill Ra and the rest of the gods. Big deal. I'll let him destroy the House of Life. I'll *definitely* let him tear down Egypt and every cursed statue of my dad, Ramses. I want that blowhard erased from existence! But the whole mortal world? Don't worry about it, pal. I'll spare most of it. I've gotta have someplace to rule, don't I?"

Zia's eyes flared orange. Her bonds started to smoke, but they held her fast. Her fire receded, and she slumped against the rocks.

Setne laughed. "Nice try, doll. You guys sit tight. If you make it through the big shake-up, I'll come back and get you. Maybe you can be my jesters or something. You two crack me up! But in the meantime, I'm afraid we're done here. No miracle's gonna drop from the sky and save you."

A rectangle of darkness appeared in the air just above the ghost's head. Sadie dropped out of it.

I'll say this for my sister: she has great timing, and she's quick on the draw. She crashed into the ghost and sent him sprawling. Then she noticed us wrapped up like presents, quickly realized what was going on, and turned toward Setne.

"Tas!" she yelled.

"Noooo!" Setne was wrapped in pink ribbons until he looked like a forkful of spaghetti.

Sadie stood and stepped back from Setne. Her eyes were puffy like she'd been crying. Her clothes were covered in dried mud and leaves.

Walt wasn't with her. My heart sank. I was almost glad my mouth was covered, because I wouldn't have known what to say.

Sadie took in the scene—the Sea of Chaos, the serpent's writhing shadow, the white obelisk. I could tell she felt the pull of Chaos. She braced her feet, leaning away from the sea like the anchorperson in a tug-of-war. I knew her well enough to tell she was steeling herself, pushing her emotions back inside and forcing her sorrow down.

"Hullo, brother dear," she said in a shaky voice. "Need some help?"

She managed to dispel the glamor on us. She looked surprised to find me holding Ra's crook and flail. "How in the world—?"

Zia briefly explained what we'd been up to—from the fight with the giant hippo through Setne's most recent betrayals.

"All that," Sadie marveled, "and you had to drag my brother along too? You poor girl. But how can we even survive here? The Chaos power…" She focused on Zia's scarab pendant. "Oh. I really am thick. No wonder Tawaret looked at you strangely. You're channeling the power of Ra."

"Ra chose me," Zia said. "I didn't want this."

Sadie got very quiet—which wasn't like her.

"Sis," I said, as gently as possible, "what happened to Walt?"

Her eyes were so full of pain that I wanted to apologize for even asking. I hadn't seen her look like that since…well, since our mom died, when Sadie was little.

"He's not coming," she said. "He's…gone."

"Sadie, I'm so sorry," I said. "Are you—?"

"I'm fine!" she snapped.

Translation: *I'm most definitely not fine, but if you ask again I'll stuff wax in your mouth.*

"We have to hurry," she continued, trying to modulate her voice. "I know how to capture the shadow. Just give me the figurine."

I had a moment of panic. Did I still *have* the statue of Apophis that Walt had made? Coming all the way here and forgetting it would've been a major bonehead move.

Fortunately, it was still at the bottom of my pack.

I handed it to Sadie, who stared at the careful red carving of the coiled serpent, the hieroglyphs of binding around the name *Apophis*. I imagined she was thinking of Walt, and all the effort he'd put into making it.

She knelt at the edge of the jetty, where the obelisk's base met the shadow.

"Sadie," I said.

She froze. "Yeah?"

My mouth felt like it was full of glue. I wanted to tell her to forget the whole thing.

Seeing her at the obelisk, with that massive shadow coiling toward the horizon…I just knew something would go wrong. The shadow would attack. The spell would backfire somehow.

Sadie reminded me so much of our mom. I couldn't shake the impression that we were repeating history. Our parents had tried to restrain Apophis once before, at Cleopatra's Needle, and our mom had died. I'd spent years watching my dad deal with his guilt. If I stood by now while Sadie got hurt…

Zia took my hand. Her fingers were trembling, but I was grateful for her presence. "This will work," she promised.

Sadie blew a strand of hair from her face. "Listen to your girlfriend, Carter. And stop distracting me."

She sounded exasperated, but there was no irritation in her eyes. Sadie understood my concerns as clearly as she knew my secret name. She was just as scared as I was, but in her own annoying way, she was trying to reassure me.

"May I continue?" she asked.

"Good luck," I managed.

Sadie nodded.

She touched the figurine to the shadow and began to chant.

I was afraid the waves of Chaos might dissolve the figurine, or, worse, pull Sadie in. Instead, the serpent's shadow began to thrash. Slowly it shrank, writhing and snapping its mouth as if it were being hit with a cattle prod. The figurine absorbed the darkness. Soon the shadow was completely gone, and the statue was midnight black. Sadie spoke a simple binding spell on the figurine: "*Hi-nehm.*"

A long hiss escaped from the sea—almost like a sigh of relief—and the sound echoed across the hills. The churning waves turned a lighter shade of red, as if some murky sediment had been dredged away. The pull of Chaos seemed to lessen just slightly.

Sadie stood. "Right. We're ready."

I stared at my sister. Sometimes she teased me that she'd eventually catch up to me in age and be my older sibling. Looking at her now, with that determined glint in her eyes and the confidence in her voice, I could almost believe her. "That was amazing," I said. "How did you know the spell?"

She scowled. Of course, the answer was obvious: she'd watched Walt do the same spell on Bes's shadow…before whatever happened to Walt.

"The execration will be easy," she said. "We have to be facing Apophis, but otherwise it's the same spell we've been practicing."

Zia prodded Setne with her foot. "That's another thing this maggot lied about. What should we do with him? We'll have to get the Book of Thoth out of those bindings, obviously, but after that should we shove him into the drink?"

"MMM!" Setne protested.

Sadie and I exchanged looks. We silently agreed that we couldn't dissolve Setne—even as horrible as he was. Maybe we'd seen too many awful things over the past few days, and we didn't need to see any more. Or maybe we knew that Osiris had to be the one to decide Setne's punishment, since we had promised to bring the ghost back to the Hall of Judgment.

Maybe, standing next to the obelisk of Ma'at, surrounded by the Sea of Chaos, we both realized that restraining ourselves from vengeance is what made us different from Apophis. Rules had their place. They kept us from unraveling.

"Drag him along," Sadie said. "He's a ghost. Can't be *that* heavy."

I grabbed his feet, and we made our way back down the jetty. Setne's head bonked against the rocks, but that didn't concern me. It took all my concentration to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Moving away from the Sea of Chaos was even harder than moving toward it.

By the time we reached the beach, I was exhausted. My clothes were drenched in sweat. We trudged across the sand and finally crested the hill.

"Oh…" I uttered some words that were *definitely* not divine.

In the cratered field below us, demons had gathered—hundreds of them, all marching in our direction. As Setne had guessed, the shadow *had* sent a distress signal to the forces of Apophis, and the call had been answered. We were trapped between the Sea of Chaos and a hostile army.

At this point, I was starting to wonder, *Why me?*

All I wanted was to infiltrate the most dangerous part of the Duat, steal the shadow of the primordial Lord of Chaos, and save the world. Was that too much to ask?

The demons were maybe two football fields away, closing rapidly. I estimated that there were at least three or four hundred of them, and more kept pouring onto the field. Several dozen winged monsters were even closer, spiraling lower and lower overhead. Against this army, we had two Kanes, Zia, and a gift-wrapped ghost. I didn't like those odds.

"Sadie, can you make a gate to the surface?" I asked.

She closed her eyes and concentrated. She shook her head. "No signal from Isis. Possibly we're too close to the Sea of Chaos."

That was a scary thought. I tried to summon the avatar of Horus. Nothing happened. I guess I should have known it would be hard to channel his powers down here, especially after I had asked

him for a weapon back on the ship, and the best he could do was an ostrich feather.

"Zia?" I said. "Your powers from Khepri are still working. Can you get us out of here?"

She clutched her scarab amulet. "I don't think so. All Khepri's energy is being spent shielding us from Chaos. He can't do any more."

I considered running back to the white obelisk. Maybe we could use it to open a portal. But I quickly dismissed the idea. The demons would be on us before we ever got there.

"We're not going to get out of this," I decided. "Can we cast the execration on Apophis right now?"

Zia and Sadie spoke in unison: "No."

I knew they were right. We had to stand face-to-face with Apophis for the spell to work. But I couldn't believe we'd come all this way, just to be stopped now.

"At least we can go out fighting." I unhooked the crook and flail from my belt.

Sadie and Zia readied their staffs and wands.

Then, at the other end of the field, a wave of confusion spread through the demons' ranks. They slowly began turning away from us, running in different directions. Behind the demon army, fireballs lit the sky. Plumes of smoke rose from newly opened craters in the ground. A battle seemed to be breaking out at the wrong end of the field.

"Who are they fighting?" I asked. "Each other?"

"No." Zia pointed, a smile spreading across her face. "Look."

It was hard to see through the hazy air, but a wedge of combatants was slowly forcing its way through the back ranks of the demons. Their numbers were smaller—maybe a hundred or so—but the demons gave way to them. Those that didn't were cut down, trampled, or blown up like fireworks.

"It's the gods!" Sadie said.

"That's impossible," I said. "The gods wouldn't march into the Duat to rescue us!"

"Not the big gods, no." She grinned at me. "But the old forgotten ones from the House of Rest would! Anubis *said* he was calling for reinforcements."

"Anubis?" I was really confused now. When had she seen Anubis?

"There!" Sadie shouted. "Oh—!"

She seemed to forget how to speak. She just waved her finger toward our new friends. The battle lines opened momentarily. A sleek black car barreled into combat. The driver had to be a maniac. He plowed down demons, going out of his way to hit them. He jumped over fiery crevices and spun in circles, flashing his lights and honking his horn. Then he came straight at us, until the front ranks of demons started to scatter. Only a few brave winged demons had the nerve to chase him.

As the car got closer, I could see it was a Mercedes limo. It climbed the hill, trailed by bat demons, and screeched to a stop in a cloud of red dust. The driver's door opened, and a small hairy man in a blue Speedo stepped out.

I had never been so happy to see someone so ugly.

Bes, in all his horrible warty glory, climbed onto the roof of his car. He turned to face the bat demons. His eyes bulged. His mouth opened impossibly wide. His hair stood out like porcupine quills, and he yelled, "BOO!"

The winged demons screamed and disintegrated.

"Bes!" Sadie ran toward him.

The dwarf god broke into a grin. He slid down to the hood, so he was almost Sadie's height when she hugged him.

"There's my girl!" he said. "And, Carter, get your sorry hide over here!"

He hugged me, too. I didn't even mind him rubbing his knuckles on my head.

"And, Zia Rashid!" Bes cried generously. "I got a hug for you too—"

"I'm good," Zia said, stepping back. "Thanks."

Bes bellowed with laughter. "You're right. Time for warm and fuzzy later. We gotta get you guys out of here!"

"The—the shadow spell?" Sadie stammered. "It actually worked?"

"Of course it worked, you crazy kid!" Bes thumped his hairy chest, and suddenly he was wearing a chauffeur's uniform. "Now, get in the car!"

I turned to grab Setne…and my heart nearly stopped. "Oh, holy Horus…" The magician was gone. I scanned the terrain in every direction, hoping he'd just inchwormed away. There was no sign of him.

Zia blasted fire at the spot where he'd been lying. Apparently, the ghost hadn't merely become invisible, because there was no scream.

"Setne was right there!" Zia protested. "Tied up in the Ribbons of Hathor! How could he just disappear?"

Bes frowned. "Setne, eh? I hate that weasel. Have you got the serpent's shadow?"

"Yeah," I said, "but Setne has the Book of Thoth."

"Can you cast the execration without it?" Bes asked.

Sadie and I exchanged looks.

"Yes," we both said.

"Then we'll have to worry about Setne later," Bes said. "We don't have much time!"

I guess if you have to travel through the Land of Demons, a limo is the way to go. Unfortunately, Bes's new sedan was no cleaner than the one we'd left at the bottom of the Mediterranean last spring. I wondered if he pre-ordered them already littered with old Chinese-food containers, stomped-on magazines, and dirty laundry.

Sadie rode shotgun. Zia and I climbed in back. Bes slammed the accelerator and played a game of hit-the-demon.

"Five points if you can hit that bloke with the cleaver head!" Sadie screamed.

Boom! Cleaver-head went flying over the hood.

Sadie applauded. "Ten points if you can hit those two dragonfly things at once."

Boom, boom! Two very large bugs hit the windshield.

Sadie and Bes laughed like crazy. Me, I was too busy yelling, "Crevice! Look out! Flaming geyser! Go left!"

Call me practical. I wanted to live. I grabbed Zia's hand and tried to hang on.

As we approached the heart of the battle, I could see the gods pushing back the demons. It looked like the entire Sunny Acres Godly Retirement Community had unleashed their geriatric wrath on the forces of darkness. Tawaret the hippo goddess was in the lead, wearing her nurse's outfit and high heels, swinging a flaming torch in one hand and a hypodermic needle in the other. She bonked one demon on the head, then injected another in the rump, causing him to pass out immediately.

Two old guys in loincloths were hobbling around, throwing fireballs into the sky and incinerating flying demons. One of the old dudes kept screaming, "My pudding!" for no apparent reason.

Heket the frog goddess leaped around the battlefield, knocking out monsters with her tongue. She seemed to have a special fondness for the demons with insect heads. A few yards away, the senile cat goddess Mekhit was smashing demons with her walker, yelling, "Meow!" and hissing.

"Should we help them?" Zia asked.

Bes chuckled. "They don't need help. This is the most fun they've had in centuries. They have a purpose again! They're going to cover our retreat while I get *you* to the river."

"But we don't have a ship anymore!" I protested.

Bes raised a furry eyebrow. "You sure about that?" He slowed the Mercedes and rolled down the window. "Hey, sweetie! You okay here?"

Tawaret turned and gave him a huge hippo smile. "We're fine, honeycakes! Good luck!"

"I'll be back!" he promised. He blew her a kiss, and I thought Tawaret was going to faint from happiness.

The Mercedes peeled out.

"Honeycakes?" I asked.

"Hey, kid," Bes growled, "do I criticize *your* relationships?"

I didn't have the guts to look at Zia, but she squeezed my hand. Sadie stayed quiet. Maybe she was thinking about Walt.

The Mercedes leaped one last flaming chasm and slammed to a stop on the beach of bones.

I pointed to the wreckage of the *Egyptian Queen*. "See? No boat."

"Oh, yeah?" Bes asked. "Then what's that?"

Upriver, light blazed in the darkness.

Zia inhaled sharply. "Ra," she said. "The sun boat approaches."

As the light got closer, I saw she was right. The gold-and-white sail gleamed. Glowing orbs flitted around the deck of a boat. The crocodile-headed god Sobek stood at the bow, knocking aside random river monsters with a big pole. And sitting in a fiery throne in the middle of the sun barque was the old god Ra.

"Hallllooooo!" he yelled across the water. "We have coooookies!"

Sadie kissed Bes on the cheek. "You're brilliant!"

"Hey, now," the dwarf mumbled. "You're gonna make Tawaret jealous. It just so happened the timing was right. If we'd missed the sun boat, we'd have been out of luck."

That thought made me shudder.

For millennia, Ra had followed this cycle—sailing into the Duat at sunset, traveling along the River of Night until he emerged into the mortal world again at sunrise. But it was a one-way trip, and the boat kept to a tight schedule. As Ra passed through the various Houses of the Night, their gates closed until the next evening, making it easy for mortal travelers like us to get stranded. Sadie and I had experienced that once before, and it hadn't been fun.

As the sun boat drifted toward the shore, Bes gave us a lopsided grin. "Ready, kids? I got a feeling things up in the mortal world aren't going to be pretty."

That was the first unsurprising thing I'd heard all day.

The glowing lights extended the boat's gangplank, and we climbed aboard for what might be the last sunrise in history.

SADIE

17. Brooklyn House Goes to War

I WAS SORRY TO LEAVE THE LAND OF DEMONS.

[Yes, Carter, I'm quite serious.]

After all, I'd had a rather successful visit there. I'd saved Zia and my brother from that horrid ghost Setne. I'd captured the serpent's shadow. I'd witnessed the Charge of the Old Folks' Brigade in all its glory, and most of all, I'd been reunited with Bes. Why wouldn't I have fond memories of the place? I might even take a beach holiday there someday, rent a cabana on the Sea of Chaos. Why not?

The flurry of activity also distracted me from less pleasant thoughts. But once we arrived at the riverbank and I had a few moments to breathe, I started thinking about how I'd learned the spell to rescue Bes's shadow. My elation turned to despair.

Walt—oh, Walt. What had he done?

I remembered how lifeless and cold he'd been, cradled in my arms amid the mud-brick ruins. Then suddenly he had opened his eyes and gasped.

Look, he'd said to me.

On the surface, I'd seen Walt as I'd always known him. But in the Duat…the boy god Anubis shimmered, his ghost-gray aura sustaining Walt's life.

Still me, they had said in unison. Their double voice had made my skin tingle.

I'll meet you at sunrise, they had promised, *at the First Nome, if you're sure you don't hate me.*

Did I hate him? Or was it *them*? Gods of Egypt, I wasn't even sure what to call him anymore! I certainly didn't know how I felt, or if I wanted to see him again.

I tried to put those thoughts aside. We still needed to defeat Apophis. Even with his captured shadow, there was no guarantee we would succeed in casting the spell. I doubted Apophis would stand idly by while we tried to obliterate him from the universe. And it was entirely possible that the execration would require more magic than Carter and I had, combined. If we burned up, my dilemma with Walt would hardly be a problem.

Nevertheless, I couldn't stop thinking about him/them—the way their warm brown eyes merged together so perfectly, and how natural Anubis's smile looked on Walt's face.

Argh! This was *not* helpful.

We climbed aboard the sun barque—Carter, Zia, Bes, and me. I was relieved beyond words that my favorite dwarf would be accompanying us to our final battle. I needed a reliably ugly god in my

life right now.

At the bow, our old enemy Sobek regarded me with a crocodile smile, which I suppose was the only kind of smile he had. "So…the little Kane children have returned."

"So," I snapped, "the crocodile god wants his teeth kicked in."

Sobek threw back his scaly green head and laughed. "Well said, girl! You have iron in your bones."

I suppose that was meant as a compliment. I chose to sneer at him and turn away.

Sobek only respected strength. In our first encounter, he had drowned Carter in the Rio Grande and smacked me across the Texas-Mexico border. We hadn't got much chummier since. From what I'd heard, he had only agreed to join our side because Horus and Isis had threatened him with extreme bodily harm. That didn't say much about his loyalty.

The glowing crew orbs fluttered around me, humming in my mind—little happy greetings of: *Sadie. Sadie. Sadie.* Once upon a time, they had *also* wanted to kill me; but since I'd awakened their old master Ra, they'd become quite friendly.

"Yes, hullo, boys," I muttered. "Lovely to see you. Excuse me."

I followed Carter and Zia to the fiery throne. Ra gave us a toothless grin. He was still as old and wrinkly as ever, but something seemed different about his eyes. Before, his gaze had always slid over me as if I were part of the scenery. Now, he actually focused on my face.

He held out a plate of macaroons and chocolate biscuits, which were a bit melted from the heat of his throne. "Cookies? Wheee!"

"Uh, thanks." Carter took a macaroon.

Naturally, I opted for the chocolate. I hadn't eaten a proper meal since we'd left our father's court.

Ra set down the platter and wobbled to his feet. Bes tried to help, but Ra waved him off. He tottered toward Zia.

"Zia," he warbled happily, as if singing a nursery rhyme. "Zia, Zia, Zia."

With a jolt, I realized it was the first time I'd heard him use her actual name.

He reached out to touch her scarab amulet. Zia backed away nervously. She glanced at Carter for reassurance.

"It's okay," Carter promised.

She took a deep breath. She unclasped her necklace and pressed it into the old man's hands. A warm glow expanded from the scarab, enveloping both Zia and Ra in a brilliant golden light.

"Good, good," Ra said. "Good…"

I expected the old god to get better. Instead, he began to crumble.

It was one of the most alarming things I'd seen in a very alarming day. First his ears fell off and melted to dust. Then his skin started turning to sand.

"What's happening?" I cried. "Shouldn't we do something?"

Carter's eyes widened with horror. His mouth opened, but no words came out.

Ra's smiling face dissolved. His arms and legs cracked apart like a desiccated sand sculpture. His particles scattered across the River of Night.

Bes grunted. “That was fast.” He didn’t seem particularly shocked. “Usually it takes longer.”

I stared at him. “You’ve seen this *before*?”

Bes gave me a crooked grin. “Hey, I took my turns working on the sun barque in the old days. We’ve *all* seen Ra go through his cycle. But it’s been a long, long time. Look.”

He pointed at Zia.

The scarab had disappeared from her hands, but golden light still radiated around her like a full-body halo. She turned toward me with a brilliant smile. I’d never seen her so at ease, so pleased.

“I see now.” Her voice was much richer, a chorus of tones descending in octaves through the Duat. “It’s all about balance, isn’t it? My thoughts and his. Or is it mine and hers…?”

She laughed like a child on her first bike ride. “Rebirth, at last! You were right, Sadie and Carter! After so many eons in the darkness, I am finally reborn through Zia’s compassion. I’d forgot what it is like to be young and powerful.”

Carter stepped back. I couldn’t blame him. The memory of Walt and Anubis merging was still fresh in my mind, so I had a sense what Carter was feeling; it was more than a little creepy hearing Zia describe herself in the third person.

I lowered my vision deeper into the Duat. In Zia’s place stood a tall man in leather and bronze armor. In some ways, he still looked like Ra. He was still bald. His face was still wrinkled and weathered with age, and he had the same kindly smile (only with teeth). Now, though, his posture was straight. His body rippled with muscles. His skin glowed like molten gold. He was the world’s buffest, most golden grandpa.

Bes knelt. “My lord Ra.”

“Ah, my small friend.” Ra ruffled the dwarf god’s hair. “Rise! It’s good to see you.”

At the bow, Sobek came to attention, holding his long iron staff like a rifle. “Lord Ra! I knew you would return.”

Ra chuckled. “Sobek, you old reptile. You would snap me up for dinner if you thought you could get away with it. Horus and Isis kept you in line?”

Sobek cleared his throat. “As you say, my king.” He shrugged. “I can’t help my nature.”

“No matter,” Ra said. “We’ll need your strength soon enough. Are we approaching sunrise?”

“Yes, my king.” Sobek pointed ahead of us.

I saw light at the end of the tunnel—literally. As we neared the end of the Duat, the River of Night widened. The exit gates stood about a kilometer ahead, flanked by statues of the sun god. Past that, daylight glowed. The river turned to clouds and poured into the morning sky.

“Very good,” Ra said. “Steer us to Giza, Lord Sobek.”

“Yes, my king.” The croc god thrust his iron staff into the water, poling us along like a gondolier.

Carter still hadn’t moved. The poor boy stared at the sun god with a mixture of fascination and shock.

“Carter Kane,” Ra said with affection, “I know this is difficult for you, but Zia cares for you greatly. Nothing about her feelings has changed.”

I coughed. “Ah…request? Please don’t kiss him.”

Ra laughed. His image rippled, and I saw Zia in front of me again.

"It's all right, Sadie," she promised. "Now would not be the time."

Carter turned awkwardly. "Um…I'll just…be over there." He bumped into the mast, then staggered toward the stern of the boat.

Zia knit her brow in concern. "Sadie, go take care of him, will you? We'll be reaching the mortal world soon. I must stay vigilant."

For once, I didn't argue. I went to check on my brother.

He was sitting by the tiller in crash position, his head between his knees.

"All right?" I asked. Stupid question, I know.

"She's an old man," he muttered. "The girl I like is a buff old man with a voice deeper than mine. I kissed her on the beach, and now…"

I sat next to him. The glowing orbs fluttered around us in excitement as the ship approached the daylight.

"Kissed her, eh?" I said. "Details, please."

I thought he might feel better if I could get him talking. I'm not sure if it worked, but at least it got his head out from between his knees. He told me about his journey with Zia through the *serapeum*, and the destruction of the *Egyptian Queen*.

Ra—I mean Zia—stood at the bow between Sobek and Bes, very carefully *not* looking back at us.

"So you told her it was all right," I summed up. "You encouraged her to help Ra. And now you're having second thoughts."

"Do you blame me?" he asked.

"We've both hosted gods ourselves," I said. "It doesn't have to be permanent. And she's still Zia. Besides, we're heading into battle. If we don't survive, do you want to spend your last few hours pushing her away?"

He studied my expression. "What happened to Walt?"

Ah…*touché*. At times, it seemed that Carter knew *my* secret name as well as I knew his.

"I…I don't know exactly. He's alive, but only because—"

"He's hosting Anubis," Carter finished.

"You knew?"

He shook his head. "Not until I saw that look on your face. But it makes sense. Walt has a knack for…whatever it is. That gray obliteration touch. Death magic."

I couldn't answer. I'd come back here to comfort Carter and reassure him that everything would be all right. Now, somehow, he'd managed to turn the tables.

He put his hand briefly on my knee. "This could work, sis. Anubis can keep Walt alive. Walt could live a normal life."

"You call that *normal*?"

"Anubis has never had a human host. This is his chance to have an actual body, to be flesh and blood."

I shivered. "Carter, it isn't like Zia's situation. *She* can separate at any time."

"So let me get this straight," Carter said. "The two guys you liked—one who was dying and one who was off-limits because he's a god—are now one guy, who isn't dying and isn't off-limits. And you're complaining."

"Don't make me sound ridiculous!" I shouted. "I'm not ridiculous!"

The three gods looked back at me. All right. Fine. I *did* sound ridiculous.

"Look," Carter said, "let's agree to freak out about this later, okay? Assuming we don't die."

I took a shaky breath. "Deal."

I helped my brother up. Together we joined the gods at the bow as the sun boat emerged from the Duat. The River of Night disappeared behind us, and we sailed across the clouds.

The Egyptian landscape spread out red and gold and green in the dawn. To the west, sandstorms swirled across the desert. To the east, the Nile snaked its way through Cairo. Directly below us, at the edge of the city, three pyramids rose on the plains of Giza.

Sobek struck his staff against the bow of the ship. He shouted like a herald: "At last, Ra has truly returned! Let his people rejoice! Let his throngs of worshippers assemble!"

Perhaps Sobek said that as a formality, or to suck up to Ra, or possibly just to make the old sun god feel worse. Whatever the case, nobody down below was assembling. Definitely nobody was rejoicing.

I'd seen this vista many times, but something was wrong. Fires burned across the city. The streets seemed strangely deserted. There were no tourists, no humans at all around the pyramids. I'd never seen Giza so empty.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

Sobek hissed in disgust. "I should have known. The weak humans are in hiding, or scared away because of the unrest in Egypt. Apophis has planned this well. His chosen battleground will be clear of mortal annoyances."

I shivered. I'd heard about the troubles in Egypt lately, along with all the strange natural disasters, but I hadn't thought of it as part of Apophis's plan.

If this was his chosen battleground…

I focused more closely on the plains of Giza. Peering into the Duat, I realized the area wasn't empty after all. Encircling the base of the Great Pyramid was an enormous serpent formed from a swirling tornado of red sand and darkness. His eyes were burning points of light. His fangs were forks of lightning. Wherever he touched, the desert boiled, and the pyramid itself shook with a horrible resonance. One of the oldest structures in human history was about to crumble.

Even from high above, I could feel the presence of Apophis. He radiated panic and fear so strongly, I could sense the mortals across Cairo cowering in their homes, afraid to go out. The whole land of Egypt was holding its breath.

As we watched, Apophis reared his massive cobra head. He struck at the desert floor, biting a house-sized crater in the sand. Then he recoiled as if he'd been stung, and hissed with anger. At first, I couldn't tell what he was fighting. I called on Isis's bird-of-prey sight and spotted a small lithe figure in a leopard-skin leotard, knives flashing in both hands as she leaped with inhuman agility and speed, striking at the serpent and evading his bite. All by herself, Bast was holding Apophis at bay.

My mouth tasted like old pennies. "She's alone. Where are the others?"

"They await the pharaoh's orders," Ra said. "Chaos has left them divided and confused. They will not march to battle without a leader."

"Then lead them!" I demanded.

The sun god turned. His form shimmered, and for a moment I saw Zia in front of me instead. I wondered if she would blast me to cinders. I had a feeling that would be quite easy for her now.

"I will face my old enemy," she said calmly, still with Ra's voice. "I won't let my loyal cat fight alone. Sobek, Bes—attend me."

"Yes, my king," Sobek said.

Bes cracked his knuckles. His chauffeur's outfit vanished, replaced by only his Dwarf Pride Speedo. "Chaos…get ready to meet Ugly."

"Wait," Carter said. "What about us? We've got the serpent's shadow."

The ship was descending rapidly now, coming in for a landing just south of the pyramids.

"First things first, Carter." Zia pointed to the Great Sphinx, which stood about three hundred meters from the pyramids. "You and Sadie must help your uncle."

Between the Sphinx's paws, a trail of smoke rose from a tunnel entrance. My heart missed a beat. Zia had once told us how that tunnel was sealed to keep archaeologists from finding their way into the First Nome. Obviously, the tunnel had been forced open.

"The First Nome is about to fall," Zia said. Her form shifted again, and it was the sun god standing before me. I really wished he/she/they would make up their mind.

"I will hold off Apophis as long as I can," Ra said. "But if you don't help your uncle and your friends immediately, there will be no one left to save. The House of Life will crumble."

I thought about poor Amos and our young initiates, surrounded by a mob of rebel magicians. We couldn't let them be slaughtered.

"She's right," I said. "Er, *he's* right. Whichever."

Carter nodded reluctantly. "You'll need these, Lord Ra."

He offered the sun god the crook and flail, but Ra shook his head. Or Zia shook her head. Gods of Egypt, this is confusing!

"When I told you the gods waited for their pharaoh," Ra said, "I meant you, Carter Kane, the Eye of Horus. I am here to fight my old enemy, not to assume the throne. That is your destiny. Unite the House of Life, rally the gods in my name. Never fear, I will hold Apophis until you come."

Carter stared at the crook and flail in his hands. He looked every bit as terrified as he had when Ra had crumbled to sand.

I couldn't blame him. Carter had just been ordered to assume the throne of creation and lead an army of magicians and gods into battle. A year ago, even six months ago, the idea of my brother's being given that kind of responsibility would've horrified me as well.

Strangely, I didn't mind it now. Thinking of Carter as the pharaoh was actually comforting. I'm sure I'll regret saying this, and I'm sure Carter will never let me forget it, but the truth was I'd been relying on my brother ever since we'd moved to Brooklyn House. I'd come to depend on his strength. I trusted him to make the right decisions, even when he didn't trust himself. When I had learned his secret name, I'd seen one very clear trait woven into his character: leadership.

"You're ready," I told him.

"Indeed," Ra agreed.

Carter looked up, a bit stunned, but I suppose he could tell I wasn't teasing him—not this time.

Bes punched him in the shoulder. "'Course you're ready, kid. Now, stop wasting time and go save your uncle!"

Looking at Bes, I tried not to get teary-eyed. I'd already lost him once.

As for Ra, he seemed so confident, but still he was confined to the form of Zia Rashid. She was a strong magician, yes, but she was new to this hosting business. If she wavered even slightly, or overextended herself…

"Good luck, then." Carter swallowed. "I hope…"

He faltered. I realized the poor boy was trying to say good-bye to his girlfriend, possibly for the last time, and he couldn't even kiss her without kissing the sun god.

Carter began to change shape. His clothes, his pack, even the crook and flail melted into plumage. His form shrank until he was a brown-and-white falcon. Then he spread his wings and dove off the side of the boat.

"Oh, I hate this part," I muttered.

I called on Isis and invited her in: *Now. It's time to act as one.*

Immediately her magic flowed into me. It felt as if someone had switched on enough hydroelectric generators to light up a nation and channeled all that power straight into me. I turned into a kite (the bird) and soared into the air.

For once, I had no problem turning back to human. Carter and I rendezvoused at the feet of the Great Sphinx and studied the newly blasted tunnel entrance. The rebels hadn't been too subtle. Stone blocks the size of cars had been reduced to rubble. The surrounding sand had blackened and melted to glass. Either Sarah Jacobi's crew had used a *ha-di* spell or several sticks of dynamite.

"This tunnel…" I said. "Doesn't the other end open just across from the Hall of Ages?"

Carter nodded grimly. He pulled out the crook and flail, which were now glowing with ghostly white fire. He plunged into the darkness. I summoned my staff and wand and followed him inside.

As we descended, we saw evidence of battle. Explosions had scorched the walls and steps. One portion of the ceiling had buckled. Carter was able to clear a path with the strength of Horus, but as soon as we were through, the tunnel collapsed behind us. We wouldn't be exiting that way.

Below us, I heard the sounds of combat—divine words being cast; fire, water, and earth magic clashing. A lion roared. Metal clanged on metal.

A few meters farther, and we found the first casualty. A young man in a tattered gray military uniform was propped against the wall, holding his stomach and wheezing painfully.

"Leonid!" I cried.

My Russian friend was pale and bloody. I put my hand on his forehead. His skin was cold.

"Below," he gasped. "Too many. I try—"

"Stay here," I said, which I realized was silly, since he could hardly move. "We'll be back with help."

He nodded bravely, but I looked at Carter and knew we were thinking the same thing. Leonid

might not last that long. His uniform coat was soaked with blood. He kept his hand over his gut, but he'd clearly been savaged—either by claws or knives or some equally horrible magic.

I cast a *Slow* spell on Leonid, which would at least steady his breathing and stem the flow of blood, but it wouldn't help much. The poor boy had risked his life to escape St. Petersburg. He'd come all the way to Brooklyn to warn me about the impending attack. Now he'd tried to defend the First Nome against his former masters, and they'd cut him down and walked right over him, leaving him to suffer a lingering death.

"We *will* be back," I promised again.

Carter and I stumbled on.

We reached the bottom of the steps and were instantly thrown into battle. A *shabti* lion leaped at my face.

Isis reacted faster than I could have. She gave me a single word to speak: *"Fah!"*

And the hieroglyph for *Release* shimmered in the air:

The lion shrank to a wax statuette and bounced harmlessly off my chest.

All around us, the corridor was in mayhem. In either direction our initiates were locked in combat with enemy magicians. Directly in front of us, a dozen rebels had formed a wedge blocking the doors to the Hall of Ages, and our friends seemed to be trying to get past them.

For a moment, that seemed backward to me. Shouldn't our side be defending the doors? Then I realized what must have happened. The attack on the sealed tunnel had surprised our allies. They'd rushed to help Amos, but by the time they'd got to the doors, the enemies were already inside. Now this lot was keeping our reinforcements from reaching Amos, while our uncle was inside the hall, possibly alone, facing Sarah Jacobi and her elite hit squad.

My pulse raced. I charged into battle, flinging spells from Isis's incredibly diverse menu. It felt good to be a goddess again, I must admit, but I had to keep careful track of my energy. If I let Isis have free reign, she would destroy our enemies in seconds, but she would also burn me up in the process. I had to temper her inclination to rend the puny mortals to pieces.

I threw my wand like a boomerang and hit a large, bearded magician who was yelling in Russian as he fought sword-to-sword against Julian.

The Russian disappeared in a golden flash. Where he'd been standing, a hamster squeaked in alarm and scurried away. Julian grinned at me. His sword blade was smoking and the turn-ups of his trousers were on fire, but otherwise he looked all right.

"About time!" he said.

Another magician charged him, and we had no further time to chat.

Carter waded forward, swinging his flail and crook as if he had trained with them all his life. An enemy magician summoned a rhino—which I thought quite rude, considering the tight space we were in. Carter lashed it with his flail, and each spiked chain became a rope of fire. The rhino crumbled, cut into three pieces, and melted into a pile of wax.

Our other friends weren't doing too badly, either. Felix used an ice spell that I'd never seen

before—encasing his enemies in big fluffy snowmen, complete with carrot noses and pipes. His army of penguins waddled around him, pecking at enemy magicians and stealing their wands.

Alyssa was fighting with another earth elementalist, but this Russian woman was clearly outmatched. She'd probably never faced the power of Geb before. Each time the Russian summoned a stone creature or tried to throw boulders, her attacks dissolved into rubble. Alyssa snapped her fingers, and the floor turned to quicksand under her opponent's feet. The Russian sank up to her shoulders, quite stuck.

At the north end of the corridor, Jaz crouched next to Cleo, tending her arm, which had been turned into a sunflower. Cleo had got off better than her opponent, though. At her feet lay a human-sized volume of the novel *David Copperfield*, which I had a feeling had once been an enemy magician.

(Carter tells me David Copperfield *is* a magician. He finds this funny for some reason. Just ignore him. I do.)

Even our ankle-biters had got into the act. Young Shelby had scattered her crayons down the hallway to trip the enemy. Now she was wielding her wand like a tennis racket, running between the legs of adult magicians, swatting them on the bottom and yelling, "Die, die, die!"

Aren't children adorable?

She swatted a large metal warrior, a *shabti* no doubt, and he transformed into a rainbow-colored potbellied pig. If we lived through the day, I had a bad feeling Shelby would want to keep it.

Some of the First Nome residents were helping us, but depressingly few. A handful of tottering old magicians and desperate merchants threw talismans and deflected spells.

Slowly but surely, we waded toward the doors, where the main wedge of enemies seemed to be focused on a single attacker.

When I realized who it was, I was tempted to turn *myself* into a hamster and scamper away, squeaking.

Walt had arrived. He ripped through the enemy line with his bare hands—throwing one rebel magician down the hallway with inhuman strength, touching another and instantly encasing the man in mummy linen. He grabbed the staff of a third rebel, and it crumbled to dust. Finally he swept his hand toward the remaining enemies, and they shrank to the size of dolls. Canopic jars—the sort used to bury a mummy's internal organs—sprang up around each of the tiny magicians, sealing them in with lids shaped like animal heads. The poor magicians yelled desperately, banging on the clay containers and wobbling about like a line of very unhappy bowling pins.

Walt turned to our friends. "Is everyone all right?"

He looked like normal old Walt—tall and muscular with a confident face, soft brown eyes, and strong hands. But his clothes had changed. He wore jeans, a dark Dead Weather T-shirt, and a black leather jacket—Anubis's outfit, sized up to fit Walt's physique. All I had to do was lower my vision into the Duat, just a bit, and I saw Anubis standing there in all his usual annoying gorgeousness. Both of them—occupying the same space.

"Get ready," Walt told our troops. "They've sealed the doors, but I can—"

Then he noticed me, and his voice faltered.

"Sadie," he said. "I—"

"Something about opening the doors?" I demanded.

He nodded mutely.

"Amos is in there?" I asked. "Fighting Kwai and Jacobi and who knows what else?"

He nodded again.

"Then stop staring at me and *open the doors*, you annoying boy!"

I was talking to both of them. It felt quite natural. And it felt good to let my anger out. I'd deal with those two—that one—whatever he was—later. Right now, my uncle needed me.

Walt/Anubis had the nerve to smile.

He put his hand on the doors. Gray ash spread across the surface. The bronze crumbled to dust.

"After you," he told me, and we charged into the Hall of Ages.

SADIE

18. Death Boy to the Rescue

THE GOOD NEWS: Amos wasn't entirely alone.

The bad news: his backup was the god of evil.

As we poured into the Hall of Ages, our rescue attempt sputtered to a stop. We hadn't expected to see a deadly aerial ballet with lightning and knives. The normal floating hieroglyphs that filled the room were gone. The holographic curtains on either side of the hall flickered weakly. Some had collapsed altogether.

As I'd suspected, an assault team of enemy magicians had locked themselves in here with Amos, but it looked like they were regretting their choice.

Hovering midair in the center of the hall, Amos was cloaked in the strangest avatar I'd ever seen. A vaguely human form swirled around him—part sandstorm, part fire, rather like the giant Apophis we'd seen upstairs, except a lot happier. The giant red warrior laughed as he fought, spinning a ten-meter black iron staff with careless force. Suspended in his chest, Amos copied the giant's moves, his face beaded with sweat. I couldn't tell if Amos was directing Set or trying to restrain him. Possibly both.

Enemy magicians flew circles around him. Kwai was easy to spot, with his bald head and blue robes, darting through the air like one of those martial arts monks who could defy gravity. He shot bolts of red lightning at the Set avatar, but they didn't seem to have much effect.

With her spiky black hair and flowing white robes, Sarah Jacobi looked like the Schizophrenic Witch of the West, especially as she was surfing about on a storm cloud like a flying carpet. She held two black knives like barbershop razors, which she threw over and over in a horrific juggling act, launching them into the Set avatar, then catching them as they returned to her hands. I'd seen knives like that before—*netjeri* blades, made from meteoric iron. They were mostly used in funeral ceremonies, but they seemed to work quite well as weapons. With every strike, they disrupted the avatar's sandy flesh a little more, slowly wearing it down. As I watched her throw her knives, anger clenched inside me like a fist. Some instinct told me that Jacobi had stuck my Russian friend Leonid with those knives before leaving him to die.

The other rebels weren't quite as successful with their attacks, but they were certainly persistent. Some blasted Set with gusts of wind or water. Others launched *shabti* creatures, like giant scorpions and griffins. One fat bloke was pelting Amos with bits of cheese. Honestly, I'm not sure I would have chosen a Cheese Master for my elite hit squad, but perhaps Sarah Jacobi got peckish during her battles.

Set seemed to be enjoying himself. The giant red warrior slammed his iron staff into Kwai's

chest and sent him spiraling through the air. He kicked another magician into the holographic curtains of the Roman Age, and the poor man collapsed with smoke coming out his ears, his mind probably overloaded with visions of toga parties.

Set thrust his free hand toward the Cheese Master. The fat magician was swallowed in a sandstorm and began to scream, but just as quickly, Set retracted his hand. The storm died. The magician dropped to the floor like a rag doll, unconscious but still alive.

"Bah!" the red warrior bellowed. "Come on, Amos, let me have *some* fun. I only wanted to strip the flesh from his bones!"

Amos's face was tight with concentration. Clearly he was doing his best to control the god, but Set had many other enemies to play with.

"Pull!" The red god shot lightning at a stone sphinx and blasted it to dust. He laughed insanely and swatted his staff at Sarah Jacobi. "This is fun, little magicians! Don't you have any more tricks?"

I'm not sure how long we stood in the doorway, watching the battle. Probably not more than a few seconds, but it seemed like an eternity.

Finally Jaz choked back a sob. "Amos…he's possessed again."

"No," I insisted. "No, this is different! He's in control."

Our initiates gazed at me with disbelief. I understood their panic. I remembered better than anyone how Set had nearly broken my uncle's sanity. It was hard to comprehend that Amos would ever willingly channel the red god's power. Yet he was doing the impossible. He was winning.

Still, even the Chief Lector couldn't channel that much power for long.

"Look at him!" I pleaded. "We have to help him! Amos isn't possessed. He's controlling Set!"

Walt frowned. "Sadie, that—that's impossible. Set can't be controlled."

Carter raised his crook and flail. "Obviously he *can* be, because Amos is doing it. Now, are we going to war, or what?"

We charged forward, but we'd hesitated too long. Sarah Jacobi had noticed our presence. She yelled down at her followers: "Now!"

She may have been evil, but she was not a fool. Their assault on Amos thus far had simply been to distract him and weaken him. On her cue, the real attack began. Kwai blasted lightning at Amos's face just as the other magicians drew out magic ropes and threw them at the Set avatar.

The red warrior staggered as the ropes tightened all at once, lashing around his legs and arms. Sarah Jacobi sheathed her knives and produced a long black lariat. Sailing her storm cloud above the avatar, she deftly lassoed his head and pulled the noose tight.

Set roared with outrage, but the avatar began to shrink. Before we could even close the distance, Amos was kneeling on the floor of the Hall of Ages, surrounded by only the thinnest of glowing red shields. Magical ropes now bound him tight. Sarah Jacobi stood behind him, holding the black lasso like a leash. One of her *netjeri* blades was pressed against Amos's neck.

"Stop!" she commanded us. "This ends *now*."

My friends hesitated. The rebel magicians turned and faced us warily.

Isis spoke in my mind: *Regrettable, but we must let him die. He hosts Set, our old enemy.*

That's my uncle! I replied.

He has been corrupted, Isis said. *He is already gone.*

"No!" I yelled. Our connection wavered. You can't share the mind of a god and have a disagreement. To be the Eye, you must act in perfect unison.

Carter seemed to be having similar trouble with Horus. He summoned the hawk warrior avatar, but almost immediately it dissipated and dropped Carter to the floor.

"Come on, Horus!" he growled. "We *have* to help."

Sarah Jacobi's laugh sounded like metal scraped through sand.

"Do you see?" She pulled tight on the noose around Amos's neck. "*This* is what comes from the path of the gods! Confusion. Chaos. *Set* himself in the Hall of Ages! Even you misguided fools cannot deny this is wrong!"

Amos clawed at his throat. He growled in outrage, but it was Set's voice that spoke. "I try to do something nice, and *this* is my thanks? You should have let me kill them, Amos!"

I stepped forward, careful to make no sudden movements. "Jacobi, you don't understand. Amos is channeling Set's power, but he's in control. He could have killed you, but he didn't. Set was a lieutenant of Ra. He's a useful ally, properly managed."

Set snorted. "Useful, yes! I don't know about the *properly managed* business. Let me go, puny magicians, so I can crush you!"

I glared at my uncle. "Set! Not helping!"

Amos's expression changed from anger to concern. "Sadie!" he said with his own voice. "Go: fight Apophis. Leave me here!"

"No," I said. "You're the Chief Lector. We'll fight for the House of Life."

I didn't look behind me, but I hoped that my friends would agree. Otherwise my last stand would be very, very short.

Jacobi sneered. "Your uncle is a servant of Set! You and your brother are sentenced to death. The rest of you, lay down your weapons. As your new Chief Lector, I will give you amnesty. Then we will battle Apophis together."

"You're in *league* with Apophis!" I yelled.

Jacobi's face turned stony cold. "Treason."

She thrust out her staff. *"Ha-di."*

I raised my wand, but Isis wasn't helping me this time. I was just Sadie Kane, and my defenses were slow. The explosion ripped through my weak shields and threw me backward into a curtain of light. Images from the Age of the Gods crackled around me—the founding of the world, the crowning of Osiris, the battle between Set and Horus—like having sixty different movies downloaded into my brain while being electrocuted. The light shattered, and I lay on the floor, dazed and drained.

"Sadie!" Carter charged toward me, but Kwai blasted him with a bolt of red lightning. Carter fell to his knees. I didn't even have the strength to cry out.

Jaz ran toward him. Little Shelby yelled, "Stop it! Stop it!" Our other initiates seemed stunned, unable to move.

"Give up," Jacobi said. I realized she was speaking with words of power, just like the ghost Setne had done. She was using magic to paralyze my friends. "The Kanes have brought you nothing but trouble. It's time this ended."

She lifted her *netjeri* blade from Amos's throat. Quick as light, she threw it at me. As the blade flew, my mind seemed to speed up. In that millisecond, I understood that Sarah Jacobi wouldn't miss. My end would be as painful as poor Leonid's, who was bleeding to death alone in the outer tunnel. Yet I could do nothing to defend myself.

A shadow crossed in front of me. A bare hand snatched the blade out of the air. The meteoric iron turned gray and crumbled.

Jacobi's eyes widened. She hastily drew her second knife.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Walt Stone," he said, "blood of the pharaohs. And Anubis, god of the dead."

He stepped in front of me, shielding me from my enemies. Maybe my vision was double because I'd cracked my head, but I saw the two of them with equal clarity—both handsome and powerful, both quite angry.

"We speak with one voice," Walt said. "Especially on this matter. *No one* harms Sadie Kane."

He thrust out his hand. The floor split open at Sarah Jacobi's feet, and souls of the dead sprang up like weeds—skeletal hands, glowing faces, fanged shadows, and winged *ba* with their claws extended. They swarmed Sarah Jacobi, wrapping her in ghostly linen, and dragged her screaming into the chasm. The floor closed behind her, leaving no trace that she had ever existed.

The black noose slackened around Amos's neck, and the voice of Set laughed with delight. "That's my boy!"

"Shut up, Father," Anubis said.

In the Duat, Anubis looked as he always had, with his tousled dark hair and lovely brown eyes, but I'd never seen him filled with such rage. I realized that anyone who dared to hurt me would suffer his full wrath, and Walt wasn't going to hold him back.

Jaz helped Carter to his feet. His shirt was burned, but he looked all right. I suppose a blast of lightning wasn't the worst thing that had happened to him lately.

"Magicians!" Carter managed to stand tall and confident, addressing both our initiates and the rebels. "We're wasting time. Apophis is above, about to destroy the world. A few brave gods are holding him back for *our* sakes, for the sake of Egypt and the world of mortals, but they can't do it alone. Jacobi and Kwai led you astray. Unbind the Chief Lector. We *have* to work together."

Kwai snarled. Red electricity arced between his fingers. "Never. We do not bow to gods."

I managed to rise.

"Listen to my brother," I said. "You don't trust the gods? They are already helping us. Meanwhile, Apophis wants us to fight one another. Why do you think your attack was timed for this morning, at the same moment Apophis is rising? Kwai and Jacobi have sold you out. The enemy is right in front of you!"

Even the rebel magicians now turned to stare at Kwai. The remaining ropes fell away from Amos.

Kwai sneered. "You're too late."

His voice hummed with power. His robes turned from blue to bloodred. His eyes glowed, his pupils turning to reptilian slits. "Even now, my master destroys the old gods, sweeping away the foundations of your world. He will swallow the sun. All of you will die."

Amos got to his feet. Red sand swirled around him, but I had no doubt who was in charge now. His white robes shimmered with power. The leopard-skin cape of the Chief Lector gleamed on his shoulders. He held out his staff, and multicolored hieroglyphs filled the air.

"House of Life," he said. "To war!"

Kwai did not give up easily.

I suppose that's what happens when the Serpent of Chaos is invading your thoughts and filling you with unlimited rage and magic.

Kwai sent a chain of red lightning across the room, knocking over most of the other magicians, including his own followers. Isis must have protected me, because the electricity rippled over me with no effect. Amos didn't seem bothered in his swirling red tornado. Walt stumbled, but only briefly. Even Carter in his weakened state managed to turn aside the lightning with his pharaoh's crook.

The others weren't as lucky. Jaz collapsed. Then Julian. Then Felix and his squad of penguins. All our initiates and the rebels they'd been fighting crumpled unconscious to the floor. So much for a massive offensive.

I summoned the power of Isis. I began to cast a binding charm; but Kwai wasn't done with his tricks. He raised his hands and created his own sandstorm. Dozens of whirlwinds spun through the hall, thickening and forming into creatures of sand—sphinxes, crocodiles, wolves, and lions. They attacked in every direction, even pouncing on our defenseless friends.

"Sadie!" Amos warned. "Protect them!"

I quickly changed spells—casting hasty shields over our unconscious initiates. Amos blasted the monsters one after the other, but they just kept re-forming.

Carter summoned his avatar. He charged at Kwai, but the red magician blasted him backward with a new surge of lightning. My poor brother slammed into a stone column, which collapsed on top of him. I could only hope his avatar had taken the brunt of the impact.

Walt released a dozen magical creatures at once—his sphinx, his camels, his ibis, even Philip of Macedonia. They charged at the sand creatures, trying to keep them away from the fallen magicians.

Then Walt turned to face Kwai.

"Anubis," Kwai hissed. "You should have stayed in your funeral parlor, boy god. You are outmatched."

By way of answer, Walt spread his hands. On either side of him, the floor cracked open. Two massive jackals leaped from the crevices, their fangs bared. Walt's form shimmered. Suddenly he was dressed in Egyptian battle armor, a *was* staff twirling in his hands like a deadly fan blade.

Kwai roared. He blasted the jackals with waves of sand. He hurled lightning and words of power at Walt, but Walt deflected them with his staff, reducing Kwai's attacks to gray ashes.

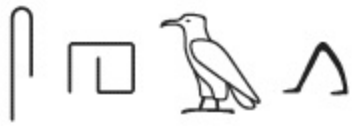
The jackals harried Kwai from either side, sinking their teeth into his legs, while Walt stepped in and swung his staff like a golf club. He hit Kwai so hard, I imagined it echoed all the way through the Duat. The magician fell. His sand creatures vanished.

Walt called off his jackals. Amos lowered his staff. Carter rose from the rubble, looking dizzy but unharmed. We gathered around the fallen magician.

Kwai should have been dead. A line of blood trickled from his mouth. His eyes were glassy. But as I studied his face, he took a sharp breath and laughed weakly.

"Idiots," he rasped. *"Sahei."*

A bloodred hieroglyph burned against his chest:



His robes erupted in flames. Before our eyes, he dissolved into sand and a wave of cold—the power of Chaos—rippled through the Hall of Ages. Columns shook. Chunks of stone fell from the ceiling. A slab the size of an oven crashed into the steps of the dais, almost crushing the pharaoh's throne.

"Bring down," I said, realizing what the hieroglyph meant. Even Isis seemed terrified by the invocation. "*Sahei* is *Bring down*."

Amos swore in Ancient Egyptian—something about donkeys trampling Kwai's ghost. "He used up his life force to cast this curse. The hall is already weakened. We'll have to leave before we're buried alive."

I glanced around us at the fallen magicians. Some of our initiates were starting to stir, but there was no way we could get them all to safety in time.

"We have to stop it!" I insisted. "We have four gods present! Can't we save the hall?"

Amos furrowed his brow. "The power of Set will not help me in this. He can only destroy, not restore."

Another column toppled. It broke across the floor, barely missing one of the unconscious rebels.

Walt—who looked quite good in armor, by the way—shook his head. "This is beyond Anubis. I'm sorry."

The floor rumbled. We had only seconds to live. Then we would be just another bunch of entombed Egyptians.

"Carter?" I asked.

He regarded me helplessly. He was still weak, and I realized his battle magic wouldn't be much good in this situation.

I sighed. "So it comes down to me, as always. Fine. You three shield the others as best you can. If this doesn't work, get out quickly."

"If *what* doesn't work?" Amos said, as more chunks of ceiling rained down around us. "Sadie, what are you planning?"

"Just a word, dear uncle." I raised my staff and called on the power of Isis.

She immediately understood what I needed. Together, we tried to find calm in the Chaos. I focused on the most peaceful, well-ordered moments of my life—and there weren't many. I remembered my sixth birthday party in Los Angeles with Carter, my dad and mum—the last clear memory I had of all of us together as a family. I imagined listening to music in my room at Brooklyn House while Khufu ate Cheerios on my dresser. I imagined sitting on the terrace with my friends, having a restful breakfast as Philip of Macedonia splashed in his pool. I remembered Sunday afternoons at Gran and Gramps's flat—Muffin on my lap, Gramps's rugby game on the telly, and

Gran's horrible biscuits and weak tea on the table. Good times, those were.

Most important, I faced down my own chaos. I accepted my jumbled emotions about whether I belonged in London or New York, whether I was a magician or a schoolgirl. I was Sadie Kane, and if I survived today, I could bloody well balance it all. And, yes, I accepted Walt and Anubis…I gave up my anger and dismay. I imagined both of them with me, and if that was peculiar, well then, it fit right in with the rest of my life. I made peace with the idea. Walt was alive. Anubis was flesh and blood. I stilled my restlessness and let go of my doubts.

"*Ma'at*," I said.

I felt as if I'd struck a tuning fork against the foundation of the earth. Deep harmony resonated outward through every level of the Duat.

The Hall of Ages stilled. Columns rose and repaired themselves. The cracks in the ceiling and floor sealed. Holographic curtains of light blazed once again along either side of the hall, and hieroglyphs once more filled the air.

I collapsed into Walt's arms. Through my fuzzy vision, I saw him smiling down at me. Anubis, too. I could see them both, and I realized I didn't have to pick.

"Sadie, you did it," he said. "You're so amazing."

"Uh-huh," I muttered. "Good night."

They tell me I was only out a few seconds, but it felt like centuries. When I came to, the other magicians were back on their feet. Amos smiled down at me. "Up you come, my girl."

He helped me to my feet. Carter hugged me quite enthusiastically, almost as if he appreciated me properly for once.

"It's not over," Carter warned. "We have to get to the surface. Are you ready?"

I nodded, though neither of us was in good shape. We'd used up too much energy in the fight for the Hall of Ages. Even with the gods' help, we were in no condition to face Apophis. But we had little choice.

"Carter," Amos said formally, gesturing to the empty throne. "You are blood of the pharaohs, Eye of Horus. You carry the crook and flail, bestowed by Ra. The kingship is yours. Will you lead us, gods and mortals, against the enemy?"

Carter stood straight. I could see the doubt and fear in him, but possibly that was just because I knew him. I'd spoken his secret name. On the outside, he looked confident, strong, adult—even kingly.

[Yes, I said that. Don't get a big head, brother dear. You're still a huge dork.]

"I'll lead you," Carter said. "But the throne will have to wait. Right now, Ra needs us. We have to get to the surface. Can you show us the quickest way?"

Amos nodded. "And the rest of you?"

The other magicians shouted assent—even the former rebels.

"We aren't many," Walt observed. "What are your orders, Carter?"

"First we get reinforcements," he said. "It's time I summoned the gods to war."

19. Welcome to the Fun House of Evil

SADIE SAYS I LOOKED CONFIDENT?

Good one.

Actually, being offered kingship of the universe (or supreme command over gods and magicians, or whatever) pretty much had me shaking in my shoes.

I was grateful that it had happened as we headed into combat, so I didn't have time to think about it too much or freak out.

Go with it, Horus said. *Use my courage.*

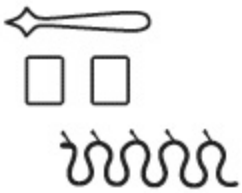
For once I was glad to let him take the lead. Otherwise when we reached the surface and I saw how bad things were, I would've run back inside, screaming like a kindergartner.

(Sadie says that's not fair. Our kindergartners weren't screaming. They were more anxious for combat than I was.)

Anyway, our little band of magicians popped out of a secret tunnel halfway up Khafre's pyramid and stared down at the end of the world.

To say Apophis was huge would be like saying the *Titanic* took on a little water. Since we'd been underground, the serpent had grown. Now he coiled under the desert for miles, wrapping around the pyramids and tunneling under the outskirts of Cairo, lifting entire neighborhoods like old carpeting.

Only the serpent's head was above ground, but it rose almost as tall as the pyramids. It was formed of sandstorm and lightning, like Sadie described; and when it fanned out its cobra's crest, it displayed a blazing hieroglyph no magician would ever write: *Isfet*, the sign of Chaos:



The four gods battling Apophis looked tiny in comparison. Sobek straddled the serpent's back, chomping down again and again with his powerful crocodile jaws and smashing away with his staff. His attacks connected, but they didn't seem to bother Apophis.

Bes danced around in his Speedo, swinging a wooden club and yelling, "Boo!" so loudly, the people in Cairo were probably cowering under the beds. But the giant Chaos snake did not look terrified.

Our cat friend Bast wasn't having much luck either. She leaped onto the serpent's head and

slashed wildly with her knives, then jumped away before Apophis could shake her off; but the serpent only seemed interested in one target.

Standing in desert between the Great Pyramid and the Sphinx, Zia was surrounded in brilliant golden light. It was hard to look directly at her, but she was shooting fireballs like a Roman candle—each one exploding against the serpent's body and disrupting his form. The serpent retaliated, biting chunks out of the desert, but he couldn't seem to find Zia. Her location shifted like a mirage—always several feet away from wherever Apophis struck.

Still, she couldn't keep this up forever. Looking into the Duat, I could see the four gods' auras weakening, and Apophis kept getting larger and stronger.

"What do we do?" Jaz asked nervously.

"Wait for my signal," I said.

"Which is what?" Sadie asked.

"I don't know yet. I'll be back."

I closed my eyes and sent my *ba* into the heavens. Suddenly I stood in the throne room of the gods. Stone columns soared overhead. Braziers of magical fire stretched into the distance, their light reflecting on the polished marble floor. In the center of the room, Ra's sun boat rested on its dais. His throne of fire sat empty.

I seemed to be alone—until I called out.

"Come to me." Horus and I spoke in unison. "Fulfill your oath of loyalty."

Trails of glowing smoke drifted into the room like slow-motion comets. Lights blazed to life, swirling between the columns. All around me, the gods materialized.

A swarm of scorpions scuttled across the floor and merged to form the goddess Serqet, who glared at me distrustfully from beneath her scorpion-shaped crown. Babi the baboon god climbed down from the nearest column and bared his fangs. Nekhbet the vulture goddess perched on the prow of the sun boat. Shu the wind god blew in as a dust devil, then took the appearance of a World War II pilot, his body created entirely from dust, leaves, and scraps of paper.

There were dozens more: the moon god Khonsu in his silver suit; the sky goddess Nut, her galactic blue skin glimmering with stars; Hapi the hippie with his green fish-scale skirt and his crazy smile; and a severe-looking woman in camouflage hunting clothes, a bow at her side, grease paint on her face, and two ridiculous palm fronds sticking out of her hair—Neith, I assumed.

I'd hoped for more friendly faces, but I knew Osiris couldn't leave the Underworld. Thoth was still stuck in his pyramid. And many other gods—probably the ones most likely to help me—were also under siege from the forces of Chaos. We'd have to make do.

I faced the assembled gods and hoped my legs weren't shaking too badly. I still felt like Carter Kane, but I knew that when they looked at me, they were seeing Horus the Avenger.

I brandished the crook and flail. "These are the symbols of the pharaoh, given to me by Ra himself. He has named me your leader. Even now, he is facing Apophis. We must join the battle. Follow me and do your duty."

Serqet hissed. "We only follow the strong. Are you strong?"

I moved with lightning speed. I lashed the flail across the goddess, cutting her into a flaming pile of baked scorpions.

A few live critters scuttled out of the wreckage. They moved to a safe distance and began to reform, until the goddess was whole again, cowering behind a brazier of blue flames.

The vulture goddess Nekhbet cackled. "He is strong."

"Then come," I said.

My *ba* returned to earth. I opened my eyes.

Above Khafre's pyramid, storm clouds gathered. With a clap of thunder they parted, and the gods charged into battle—some riding war chariots, some in floating warships, some on the backs of giant falcons. The baboon god Babi landed atop the Great Pyramid. He pounded his chest and howled.

I turned to Sadie. "How's that for a signal?"

We clambered down the pyramid to join the fight.

First tip on fighting a giant Chaos serpent: Don't.

Even with a squadron of gods and magicians at your back, it's not a battle you're likely to win. I got clued in to this as we charged closer and the world seemed to fracture. I realized Apophis wasn't just coiling in and out of the desert, wrapping himself around the pyramids. He was coiling in and out of the Duat, splintering reality into different layers. Trying to find him was like running through a fun house full of mirrors, each mirror leading to another fun house filled with more mirrors.

Our friends began to split up. All around us, gods and magicians became isolated, some sinking deeper into the Duat than others. We fought a single enemy, but we were each fighting only a fragment of his power.

At the base of the pyramid, snaky coils encircled Walt. He tried to force his way out, blasting the serpent with gray light that turned his scales to ashes; but the serpent just regenerated, closing tighter and tighter around Walt. A few hundred feet away, Julian had summoned a full Horus avatar, a giant green hawk-headed warrior with a *khopesh* in either hand. He sliced away at the serpent's tail—or at least one version of it—while the tail lashed around and tried to impale him. Deeper in the Duat, the goddess Serqet stood in nearly the same place. She had turned herself into a giant black scorpion and was confronting another image of the serpent's tail, parrying it with her stinger in a bizarre sword fight. Even Amos had been waylaid. He faced the wrong direction (or so it looked to me) and sliced his staff through the empty air, shouting command words at nothing.

I hoped that we were weakening Apophis by forcing him to deal with so many of us at once, but I couldn't see any sign of the serpent's power decreasing.

"He's dividing us!" Sadie shouted. Even standing right next to me, she seemed to be speaking from the other side of a roaring wind tunnel.

"Grab hold!" I held out the pharaoh's crook. "We have to stay together!"

She took the other end of the crook, and we forged ahead.

The closer we got to the serpent's head, the harder it was to move. I felt like we were running through layers of clear syrup, each thicker and more resistant than the last. I looked around us and realized most of our allies had fallen away. Some I couldn't even see because of the Chaos distortion.

Ahead of us, a bright light shimmered as if through fifty feet of water.

"We have to get to Ra," I said. "Concentrate on him!"

What I was really thinking: *I have to save Zia.* But I was pretty sure Sadie knew that without my

spelling it out.

I could hear Zia's voice, summoning waves of fire against her enemy. She couldn't be much farther—maybe twenty feet in mortal distance? Through the Duat it might have been a thousand miles.

"Almost there!" I said.

You're too late, little ones, the voice of Apophis hummed in my ears. *Ra will be my breakfast today.*

A snake coil as big as a subway car slammed into the sand at our feet, almost crushing us. The scales rippled with Chaos energy, making me want to double over with nausea. Without Horus shielding me, I'm pretty sure I would have been vaporized just standing so close to it. I swung my flail. Three lines of fire cut through the snake's hide, blasting it to shreds of red and gray fog.

"Okay?" I asked Sadie.

She looked pale, but nodded. We trudged on.

A few of the most powerful gods still fought around us. Babi the baboon was riding one version of the serpent's head, pounding his massive fists between Apophis's eyes, but the serpent seemed only mildly annoyed. The hunter goddess Neith hid behind a pile of stone blocks, sniping at another snakehead with her arrows. She was pretty easy to spot because of the palm fronds in her hair, and she kept yelling something about a Jelly Baby conspiracy. Farther on, another serpent's mouth sank its fangs into Nekhbet the vulture goddess, who shrieked in pain and exploded into a pile of black feathers.

"We're running out of gods!" Sadie cried.

Finally we reached the middle of the Chaos storm. Walls of red and gray smoke swirled around us, but the roar died in the center as if we'd stepped into the eye of a hurricane. Above us rose the true head of the serpent—or at least the manifestation that held most of his power.

How did I know this? His skin looked more solid, glistening with golden red scales. His mouth was a pink cavern with fangs. His eyes glowed, and his cobra's hood spread so wide, it blocked a quarter of the sky.

Before him stood Ra, a shining apparition too bright to look at directly. If I glanced from the corner of my eye, however, I could see Zia at the center of the light. She now wore the clothes of an Egyptian princess—a silky dress of white and gold, a golden necklace and armbands. Even her staff and wand were gilded. Her image danced in the hot vapor, causing the serpent to misjudge her location every time he struck.

Zia shot tracers of red flame toward Apophis—blinding his eyes and burning away patches of his skin—but the damage seemed to heal almost instantly. He was growing stronger and larger. Zia wasn't so fortunate. If I concentrated, I could sense her life force, her *ka*, growing weaker. The luminous glow at the center of her chest was becoming smaller and more concentrated, like a flame reduced to a pilot light.

Meanwhile, our feline friend Bast was doing her best to distract her old enemy. Over and over she jumped on the serpent's back, slashing with her knives and mewling in anger, but Apophis just shook her off, throwing her back into the storm.

Sadie scanned the area with alarm. "Where's Bes?"

The dwarf god had disappeared. I was beginning to fear the worst when a small grumpy voice near the edge of the storm called, "Some help, maybe?"

I hadn't paid much attention to the ruins around us. The plains of Giza were littered with big stone blocks, trenches, and old building foundations from previous excavations. Under a nearby car-sized wedge of limestone, the dwarf god's head was sticking out.

"Bes!" Sadie cried as we ran to his side. "Are you all right?"

He glared up at us. "Do I look all right, kid? I a have ten-ton block of limestone on my chest. Snake-breath over there knocked me flat and dropped this thing on top of me. Most blatant act of dwarf cruelty ever!"

"Can you move it?" I asked.

He gave me a look almost as ugly as his *Boo!* face. "Gee, Carter, I didn't think of that. It's so comfortable under here. *Of course* I can't move it, you dolt! Blocks of stone don't scare easily. Help a dwarf out, huh?"

"Stand back," I told Sadie.

I summoned the strength of Horus. Blue light encased my hand, and I karate-chopped the stone. It cracked right down the middle, falling on either side of the dwarf god.

It would've been more impressive if I hadn't yelped like a puppy and cradled my fingers. Apparently I needed to work on the karate trick more, because my hand felt like it was boiling in oil. I was pretty sure I'd broken some bones in there.

"All right?" Sadie asked.

"Yeah," I lied.

Bes climbed to his feet. "Thanks, kid. Now it's time for some snake-bashing."

We ran to help Zia, which turned out to be a bad idea. She glanced over and saw us—and, just for a moment, she was distracted.

"Carter, thank the gods!" She spoke in two-part harmony—partly her, partly the deep commanding voice of Ra, which was a little hard to take. Call me close-minded, but hearing my girlfriend talk like a five-thousand-year-old male god was not on my top ten list of Things I Find Attractive. Still, I was so glad to see her, I almost didn't care.

She lobbed another fireball down the throat of Apophis. "You're just in time. Our snaky friend is getting stro—"

"Look out!" Sadie screamed.

This time, Apophis wasn't fazed by the fire. He struck immediately—and he didn't miss. His mouth hit like a wrecking ball.

When Apophis rose again, Zia was gone. There was a crater in the sand where she'd been standing, and a human-sized lump illuminated the snake's gullet from the inside, glowing as it traveled down his throat.

Sadie tells me that I went a little insane. Honestly, I don't remember. The next thing I can recall, my voice was raw from screaming, and I was staggering away from Apophis, my magic almost exhausted, my broken hand throbbing, my crook and flail smoking with red-gray ooze—the blood of Chaos.

Apophis had three gashes in his neck that weren't closing. Otherwise, he looked fine. It's hard to tell if a snake has an expression, but I was pretty sure he was gloating.

"As it was foretold!" He spoke aloud, and the earth shook. Cracks spread across the desert as if

it had suddenly become thin ice. The sky turned black, lit only by stars and streaks of red lightning. The temperature began to drop. "You cannot cheat destiny, Carter Kane! I have swallowed Ra. Now the end of the world is at hand!"

Sadie fell to her knees and sobbed. Despair swept over me, worse than the cold. I felt Horus's power fail, and I was just Carter Kane again. All around us, in different levels of the Duat, gods and magicians stopped battling as terror spread through their ranks.

With catlike agility, Bast landed next to me, breathing hard. Her hair was puffed out so much, it looked like a sea urchin covered with sand. Her bodysuit was ripped and torn. She had a nasty bruise on the left side of her jaw. Her knives were steaming and pitted with corrosion from the serpent's poison.

"No," she said firmly. "No, no, no. What's our plan?"

"Plan?" I tried to make sense of her question. Zia was gone. We'd failed. The ancient prophecy had come true, and I would die knowing that I was a complete and utter loser. I looked at Sadie, but she seemed just as shell-shocked.

"Wake up, kid!" Bes waddled up to me and kicked me in the kneecap, which was as high as he could reach.

"Ow!" I protested.

"You're the leader now," he growled. "So you'd *better* have a plan. I didn't come back to life to get killed again!"

Apophis hissed. The ground continued to crack, shaking the foundations of the pyramids. The air was so cold, my breath turned to mist.

"Too late, poor children." The serpent's red eyes stared down at me. "Ma'at has been dying for centuries. Your world was only a temporary speck in the Sea of Chaos. All that you built meant nothing. *I* am your past and your future! Bow to me now, Carter Kane, and perhaps I will spare you and your sister. I will enjoy having survivors to witness my triumph. Is that not preferable to death?"

My limbs felt heavy. Somewhere inside, I was a scared little boy who wanted to live. I'd lost my parents. I'd been asked to fight a war that was *way* too big for me. Why should I keep going when it was hopeless? And if I could save Sadie…

Then I focused on the serpent's throat. The glow of the swallowed sun god sank lower and lower into Apophis's gullet. Zia had given her life to protect us.

Never fear, she'd said. *I will hold Apophis until you come.*

Anger cleared my thoughts. Apophis was trying to sway me, the way he'd corrupted Vlad Menshikov, Kwai, Sarah Jacobi, and even Set, the god of evil himself. Apophis was the master of eroding reason and order, of destroying everything that was good and admirable. He was selfish, and he wanted me to be selfish as well.

I remembered the white obelisk rising from the Sea of Chaos. It had stood for thousands of years, against all odds. It represented courage and civilization, making the right choice instead of the easy choice. If I failed today, that obelisk would finally crumble. Everything humans had built since the first pyramids of Egypt would be for nothing.

"Sadie," I said, "you have the shadow?"

She got to her feet, her shocked expression turning to rage. "I thought you'd never ask."

From her bag she produced the granite figurine, now midnight black with the shadow of Apophis.

The serpent recoiled, hissing. I thought I detected fear in his eyes.

"Don't be foolish," Apophis snarled. "That ridiculous spell will not work—not now, when I am triumphant! Besides, you are too weak. You would never survive the attempt."

Like all effective threats, it had the ring of truth. My magic reserves were nearly tapped out. Sadie's couldn't be much better. Even if the gods helped, we would likely burn ourselves up casting an execration.

"Ready?" Sadie asked me, her tone defiant.

"Attempt it," Apophis warned, "and I will raise your souls from Chaos again and again, just so I can kill you slowly. I will do the same for your father and mother. You will know an eternity of pain."

I felt like I'd swallowed one of Ra's fireballs. My fists clenched around the crook and flail, despite the throbbing pain in my hand. The power of Horus surged back into me—and once again we were in absolute agreement. I was his Eye. I *was* the Avenger.

"Mistake," I told the serpent. "You should *never* threaten my family."

I threw the crook and flail. They smashed into Apophis's face and erupted in a column of fire like a nuclear blast.

The serpent howled in pain, engulfed in flames and smoke; but I suspected I'd only bought us a few seconds.

"Sadie," I said, "are you ready?"

She nodded and offered me the figurine. Together, we held it and prepared for what might be the last spell of our lives. There was no need to consult a scroll. We'd been practicing for this execration for months. We both knew the words by heart. The only question was whether the shadow would make the difference. Once we started, there would be no stopping. And whether we failed or succeeded, we would probably burn up.

"Bes and Bast," I said, "can you two keep Apophis away from us?"

Bast smiled and hefted her knives. "Protect my kittens? You don't even need to ask." She glanced at Bes. "And in case we die, I'm sorry about all the times I toyed with your emotions. You deserved better."

Bes snorted. "That's okay. I finally came to my senses and found the right girl. Besides, you're a cat. It's your nature to think you're the center of the universe."

She stared at him blankly. "But I *am* the center of the universe."

Bes laughed. "Good luck, kids. Time to bring on the ugly."

"DEATH!" Apophis screamed, emerging from the column of fire with his eyes blazing.

Bast and Bes—the two greatest friends and protectors we'd ever had—charged to meet Apophis.

Sadie and I began the spell.

CARTER

20. I Take a Chair

LIKE I SAID, I'M NOT GOOD WITH INCANTATIONS.

Doing one right requires unbroken concentration, correct pronunciation, and perfect timing. Otherwise you're liable to destroy yourself and everyone within ten feet, or turn yourself into some form of marsupial.

Trying to cast a spell with someone else—that's doubly hard.

Sure, Sadie and I had studied the words, but it's not like we could actually *do* the execration in advance. With a spell like that, you only get one shot.

As we began, I was aware of Bast and Bes battling the serpent, and our other allies locked in combat at different levels of the Duat. The temperature kept dropping. Crevices widened in the ground. Red lightning spread across the sky like cracks in a black dome.

It was hard to keep my teeth from chattering. I concentrated on the stone figurine of Apophis. As we chanted, the statue began to smoke.

I tried not to think about the last time I'd heard this incantation. Michel Desjardins had died casting it, and he had faced only a partial manifestation of the serpent, not Apophis at his full power after triumphantly devouring Ra.

Focus, Horus told me.

Easy for him to say. The noise, cold, and explosions around us made it almost impossible—like trying to count backward from a hundred while people scream random numbers in your ears.

Bast was thrown over our heads and landed against a stone block. Bes roared in anger. He slammed his club into the snake's neck so hard, Apophis's eyes rattled in his head.

Apophis snapped at Bes, who grabbed one fang and hung on for dear life as the serpent raised his head and shook his mouth, trying to dislodge the dwarf god.

Sadie and I continued to chant. The serpent's shadow steamed as the figurine heated up. Gold and blue light swirled around us as Isis and Horus did their best to shield us. Sweat stung my eyes. Despite the frosty air, I began to feel feverish.

When we came to the most important part of the spell—the naming of the enemy—I finally began to sense the true nature of the serpent's shadow. Funny how that works: sometimes you don't really understand something until you destroy it. The *sheut* was more than just a copy or a reflection, more than a "backup disk" for the soul.

A person's shadow stood for his legacy, his impact on the world. Some people cast hardly any shadow at all. Some cast long, deep shadows that endured for centuries. I thought about what the ghost Setne had said—how he and I had each grown up in the shadow of a famous father. I realized

now that he hadn't just meant it as a figure of speech. My dad cast a powerful shadow that still affected me and the whole world.

If a person cast no shadow at all, he couldn't be alive. His existence became meaningless. Execrating Apophis by destroying his shadow would cut his connection to the mortal world completely. He'd never be able to rise again. I finally understood why he'd been so anxious to burn Setne's scrolls, and why he was afraid of this spell.

We reached the last lines. Apophis dislodged Bes from his fang, and the dwarf sailed into the side of the Great Pyramid.

The serpent turned toward us as we spoke the final words: "We exile you beyond the void. You are no more."

"NO!" Apophis roared.

The statue flared, dissolving in our hands. The shadow disappeared in a puff of vapor, and an explosive wave of darkness knocked us off our feet.

The serpent's legacy on the earth shattered—the wars, murders, turmoil, and anarchy Apophis had caused since ancient times finally lost power, no longer casting their shadow across our future. Souls of the dead were expelled from the blast—thousands of ghosts that had been trapped and crushed within the shadow of Chaos. A voice whispered in my mind: *Carter*, and I sobbed with relief. I couldn't see her, but I knew that our mother was free. Her spirit was returning to its place in the Duat.

"Shortsighted mortals!" Apophis writhed and began to shrink. "You haven't just killed me. You've exiled the gods!"

The Duat collapsed, layer upon layer, until the plains of Giza were one reality again. Our magician friends stood in a daze around us. The gods, however, were nowhere to be seen.

The serpent hissed, his scales falling away in smoking pieces. "Ma'at and Chaos are linked, you fools! You cannot push me away without pushing away the gods. As for Ra, he shall die within me, slowly digested—"

He was cut short (literally) when his head exploded. Yes, it was just as gross as it sounds. Flaming bits of reptile flew everywhere. A ball of fire rolled up from the serpent's neck. The body of Apophis crumbled into sand and steaming goo, and Zia Rashid stepped out of the wreckage.

Her dress was in tatters. Her golden staff had cracked like a wishbone, but she was alive.

I ran toward her. She stumbled and collapsed against me, completely exhausted.

Then someone else rose from the smoking ruins of Apophis.

Ra shimmered like a mirage, towering over us as a muscular old man with golden skin, kingly robes, and the pharaoh's crown. He stepped forward and daylight returned to the sky. The temperature warmed. The cracks in the ground sealed themselves.

The sun god smiled down at me. "Well done, Carter and Sadie. Now, I must withdraw as the other gods have done, but I owe you my life."

"Withdraw?" My voice didn't sound like mine. It was deeper, more gravelly—but it wasn't Horus's voice either. The war god seemed to be gone from my mind. "You mean…forever?"

Ra chuckled. "When you're as old as I am, you learn to be careful with that word *forever*. I thought I was leaving forever the first time I abdicated. For a while, at least, I must retreat into the

sky. My old enemy Apophis was not wrong. When Chaos is pushed away, the gods of order, Ma'at, must also distance themselves. Such is the balance of the universe."

"Then…you should take these." Again I offered him the crook and flail.

Ra shook his head. "Keep them for me. You are the rightful pharaoh. And take care of my favored one…" He nodded at Zia. "She will recover, but she will need support."

Light blazed around the sun god. When it faded, he was gone. Two dozen weary magicians stood around a smoking, serpent-shaped mark in the desert as the sun rose over the pyramids of Giza.

Sadie rested her hand on my arm. "Brother, dear?"

"Yeah?"

"That was a bit too close."

For once, I had no argument with my sister.

The rest of the day was a blur. I remember helping Zia to the healing rooms of the First Nome. My own broken hand took only minutes to fix, but I stayed with Zia until Jaz told me I needed to go. She and the other healers had dozens of wounded magicians to treat—including the Russian kid Leonid, who, amazingly, was expected to pull through—and while Jaz thought I was very sweet, I was very much in the way.

I wandered through the main cavern and was shocked to see it full of people. Portals around the world had started working again. Magicians were flooding in to help with cleanup and pledge their support to the Chief Lector. Everybody loves to show up at the party once all the hard work is done.

I tried not to feel bitter about it. I knew that many of the other nomes had been fighting their own battles. Apophis had done his best to divide and conquer us. Still, it left a bad taste in my mouth. Many people stared in awe at Ra's crook and flail, which still hung from my belt. A few people congratulated me and called me a hero. I kept walking.

As I passed the staff vendor's cart, someone said, *"Pssssst!"*

I glanced toward the nearest alley. The ghost Setne was leaning against the wall. I was so startled, I thought I must be hallucinating. He couldn't possibly be here, still in his horrible jacket and jewelry and jeans, his Elvis hair perfectly combed, the Book of Thoth tucked under his arm.

"You did good, pal," he called. "Not the way I would've handled it, but not bad."

Finally I unfroze. "*Tas!*"

Setne just grinned. "Yeah, we're done playing that game. But don't worry, pal. I'll see you around."

He disappeared in a puff of smoke.

I'm not sure how long I stood there before Sadie found me.

"All right?" she asked.

I told her what I'd seen. She winced, but didn't look very surprised. "I suppose we'll have to deal with that git sooner or later, but for now, you'd best come with me. Amos has called a general assembly in the Hall of Ages." She slipped her arm through mine. "And try to smile, brother dear. I know it's hard. But you're a role model now, as horrifying as I find that."

I did my best, though it was difficult to put Setne out of my mind.

We passed several of our friends helping with the restoration. Alyssa and a squad of earth elementalists were reinforcing walls and ceilings, trying to make sure the caverns didn't collapse on us.

Julian was sitting on the steps of the Scrying House, chatting up a few girls from the Scandinavian nome. "Yeah, you know," he was telling them, "Apophis saw me coming with my big combat avatar, and he pretty much knew it was over."

Sadie rolled her eyes and pulled me along.

Little Shelby and the other ankle-biters ran up to us, grinning and breathless. They'd helped themselves to some charms from one of the unmanned shopping kiosks, so they looked like they'd just come back from Egyptian Mardi Gras.

"I killed a snake!" Shelby told us. "A big snake!"

"Really?" I asked. "All by yourself?"

"Yes!" Shelby assured me. "Kill, kill, kill!" She stomped her feet, and sparks flew from her shoes. Then she ran off, chasing her friends.

"That girl has a future," Sadie said. "Reminds me of myself when I was young."

I shuddered. What a disturbing thought.

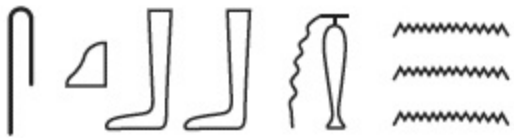
Gongs began ringing throughout the tunnels, summoning everyone to the Hall of Ages. By the time we got there, the hall was absolutely jammed with magicians—some in robes, some in modern clothes, some in pajamas like they'd teleported straight from bed. On either side of the carpet, holographic curtains of light shimmered between the columns just as they had before.

Felix ran up to us, all smiles, with a herd of penguins behind him. (Herd? Flock? Gaggle? Oh, whatever.)

"Check it out!" he said happily. "I learned this one during the battle!"

He spoke a command word. At first I thought it was *shish kebab*, but later he told me it was: *"Se-kebeb!"—Make cold.*

Hieroglyphs appeared on the floor in frosty white:



The chill spread until a twenty-foot-wide section of the floor was coated in thick white ice. The penguins waddled across it, flapping their wings. One unfortunate magician stepped back and slipped so badly, his staff went flying.

Felix pumped his fist. "Yes! I found my path. I'm supposed to follow the god of ice!"

I scratched my head. "There's a god of ice? Egypt is a desert. Who's the ice god?"

"I have no idea!" Felix beamed. He slid across the ice and went running off with his penguins.

We made our way down the hall. Magicians were trading stories, mingling, and checking in with old friends. Hieroglyphs floated through the air, brighter and thicker than I'd ever seen, like a rainbow alphabet soup.

Finally the crowd noticed Sadie and me. A hush spread through the room. All eyes turned toward us. The magicians parted, clearing the way to the throne.

Most of the magicians smiled as we walked past. A few whispered thanks and congratulations. Even the former rebel magicians seemed genuinely pleased to see us. But I did catch a few angry looks. No matter that we'd defeated Apophis; some of our fellow magicians would always doubt us. Some would never stop hating us. The Kane family still needed to watch our backs.

Sadie scanned the crowd anxiously. I realized she was looking for Walt. I'd been so focused on Zia, I hadn't thought about how worried Sadie must be. Walt had disappeared after the battle, along with the rest of the gods. He didn't seem to be here now.

"I'm sure he's fine," I told her.

"Shh." Sadie smiled at me, but her eyes said: *If you embarrass me in front of all these people, I will strangle you.*

Amos waited for us at the steps of the throne. He'd changed into a crimson suit that went surprisingly well with his leopard-skin cape. His hair was braided with garnets, and his glasses were tinted red. The color of Chaos? I got the feeling he was playing up his connection to Set—which all the other magicians had definitely heard about by now.

For the first time in history, our Chief Lector had the god of evil, strength, and Chaos on speed dial. That might make people trust him less, but magicians were like the gods—they respected strength. I doubted Amos would have much trouble enforcing his rule anymore.

He smiled as we approached. "Carter and Sadie, on behalf of the House of Life, I thank you. You have restored Ma'at! Apophis has been execrated, and Ra has once again risen into the heavens, but this time in triumph. Well done!"

The hall erupted in cheering and applause. Dozens of magicians raised their staffs and sent up miniature firework displays.

Amos embraced us. Then he stepped aside and gestured me toward the throne. I hoped that Horus might give me some words of encouragement, but I couldn't feel his presence at all.

I tried to control my breathing. That chair had been empty for thousands of years. How could I be sure it would even hold my weight? If the throne of the pharaohs broke under my royal butt, that would be a great omen.

Sadie nudged me. "Go on, then. Don't be stupid."

I climbed the steps and eased myself onto the throne. The old chair creaked, but it held me.

I gazed out over the crowd of magicians.

Horus wasn't there for me. But somehow, that was okay. I glanced over at the shimmering curtains of light—the New Age, glowing purple—and I had a feeling it was going to be an age of good things, after all.

My muscles began to relax. I felt like I'd stepped out of the war god's shadow, just as I'd stepped out of my father's. I found the words.

"I accept the throne." I held up the crook and flail. "Ra has given me authority to lead the gods and magicians in times of crisis, and I'll do my best. Apophis has been banished, but the Sea of Chaos is always there. I've seen it with my own eyes. Its forces will always try to erode Ma'at. We can't think that all our enemies are gone."

The crowd stirred nervously.

"But for now," I added, "we are at peace. We can rebuild and expand the House of Life. If war

comes again, I'll be here as the Eye of Horus and as pharaoh. But as Carter Kane…"

I rose and placed the crook and flail on the throne. I stepped down from the dais. "As Carter Kane, I'm a kid who has a lot of catching up to do. I've got my own nome to run at Brooklyn House. And I've got to graduate from high school. So I'm going to leave day-to-day operations where they should be—in the hands of the Chief Lector, steward of the pharaoh, Amos Kane."

Amos bowed to me, which felt a little strange. The crowd applauded wildly. I wasn't sure if they approved of me, or if they were just relieved that a kid wasn't going to be giving them daily orders from the throne. Either way, I was okay with it.

Amos embraced Sadie and me again.

"I'm proud of you both," he said. "We'll speak soon, but right now, come…" He gestured to the side of the dais, where a door of darkness had opened in the air. "Your parents would like to see you."

Sadie looked at me nervously. "Uh-oh."

I nodded. Strange how I went instantly from the pharaoh of the universe to a kid worried about getting grounded. As much as I wanted to see my parents, I'd broken an important promise to my father…I'd lost track of a dangerous prisoner.

The Hall of Judgment had turned into Party Central. Ammit the Devourer ran around the scales of justice, yapping excitedly with a birthday hat on his crocodile head. The guillotine-headed demons lounged on their pole arms, holding glasses of what looked like champagne. I didn't know how they could drink with those guillotine heads, but I didn't want to find out. Even the blue judgment god Disturber seemed to be in a good mood. His Cleopatra wig was sideways on his head. His long scroll had unraveled halfway across the room, but he was laughing and talking with the other judgment gods who had been rescued from the House of Rest. Fire-embracer and Hot Foot kept dropping cinders on his papyrus, but Disturber didn't seem to notice or care.

At the far end of the room, Dad sat on his throne, holding hands with our ghostly mom. To the left of the dais, spirits from the Underworld played in a jazz ensemble. I was pretty sure I recognized Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and a few of my dad's other favorites. Being the god of the Underworld has its perks.

Dad beckoned us forward. He didn't look mad, which was a good sign. We made our way through the crowd of happy demons and judgment gods. Ammit yapped at Sadie and purred as she scratched under his chin.

"Children." Dad held out his arms.

It felt strange being called children. I didn't feel like a child anymore. Children weren't asked to fight Chaos serpents. They didn't lead armies to stop the end of the world.

Sadie and I both hugged our dad. I couldn't hug Mom, of course, since she was a ghost, but I was happy enough to see her safe. Except for the glowing aura around her, she looked just like she did when she was alive—dressed in jeans and her *ankh* T-shirt, her blond hair gathered back in a bandana. If I didn't look directly at her, I could have almost mistaken her for Sadie.

"Mom, you survived," I said. "How—?"

"All thanks to you two." Mom's eyes sparkled. "I held on as long as I could, but the shadow was too powerful. I was consumed, along with so many other spirits. If you hadn't destroyed the *sheut*

when you did and released us, I would've been…well, it doesn't matter now. You've done the impossible. We are so proud."

"Yes," Dad agreed, squeezing my shoulder. "Everything we've worked for, everything we've hoped for—you have accomplished. You've exceeded my highest expectations."

I hesitated. Was it possible he didn't know about Setne?

"Dad," I said, "um…we didn't succeed at *everything*. We lost your prisoner. I still don't understand how he escaped. He was tied up and—"

Dad raised his hand to stop me. "I heard. We may never know how Setne escaped exactly, but you can't blame yourselves."

"We can't?" Sadie asked.

"Setne has evaded capture for eons," Dad said. "He's outwitted gods, magicians, mortals, and demons. When I let you take him, I suspected he would find a way to escape. I just hoped you could control him long enough to get his help. And you did."

"He got us to the shadow," I admitted. "But he also stole the Book of Thoth."

Sadie bit her lip. "Dangerous stuff, that book. Setne may not be able to cast all the spells himself, being a ghost, but he could still cause all sorts of mischief."

"We will find him again," Dad promised. "But for now, let's celebrate your victory."

Our mom reached out and brushed her ghostly hand through Sadie's hair. "May I borrow you a moment, my dear? I have something I'd like to discuss with you."

I wasn't sure what that was about, but Sadie followed our mom toward the jazz band. I hadn't noticed before, but two of the ghostly musicians looked very familiar, and rather out of place. A big redheaded man in Western clothes sat at a steel guitar, grinning and tapping his boots as he traded solos with Miles Davis. Next to him, a pretty blond woman played the fiddle, leaning down from time to time to kiss the redheaded man on the forehead. JD Grissom and his wife, Anne, from the Dallas Museum, had finally found a party that didn't have to end. I'd never heard steel guitar and fiddle with a jazz band before, but somehow they made it work. I suppose Amos was right: music and magic both needed a little chaos within the order.

As Mom and Sadie talked, Sadie's eyes widened. Her expression turned serious. Then she smiled shyly and blushed, which wasn't like Sadie at all.

"Carter," my dad said, "you did well in the Hall of Ages. You will make a good leader. A wise leader."

I wasn't sure how he knew about my speech, but a lump formed in my throat. My dad doesn't hand out compliments lightly. Being with him again, I remembered how much easier life had been, traveling with him. He'd always known what to do. I could always count on his calming presence. Until that Christmas Eve in London when he had disappeared, I hadn't appreciated just how much I had relied on him.

"I know it's been hard," Dad said, "but you will lead the Kane family into the future. You have truly stepped out of my shadow."

"Not completely," I said. "I wouldn't want that. As dads go, you're pretty, um, shadowy."

He laughed. "I'll be here if you need me. Never doubt that. But, as Ra said, the gods will have a harder time contacting the mortal world, now that Apophis has been execrated. As Chaos retreats, so

must Ma'at. Nevertheless, I don't think you'll *need* much help. You've succeeded on your own strength. Now *you* are the one casting the long shadow. The House of Life will remember you for ages to come."

He hugged me once more, and it was easy to forget that he was the god of the dead. He just seemed like my dad—warm and alive and strong.

Sadie came over, looking a little shaken.

"What?" I asked.

She giggled for no apparent reason, then got serious again. "Nothing."

Mom drifted next to her. "Off you go, you two. Brooklyn House is waiting."

Another door of darkness appeared by the throne. Sadie and I stepped through. For once I wasn't worried about what waited on the other side. I knew we were going home.

Life got back to normal with surprising speed.

I'll let Sadie tell you about the events at Brooklyn House and her own drama. I'll fast-forward to the interesting stuff.

[Ouch! I thought we agreed: no pinching!]

Two weeks after the battle with Apophis, Zia and I were sitting in the food court at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota.

Why there? I'd heard the Mall of America was the biggest in the country, and I figured we'd start big. It was an easy trip through the Duat. Freak was happy to sit on the roof and eat frozen turkeys while Zia and I explored the mall.

[That's right, Sadie. For our first real date, I picked up Zia in a boat pulled by a deranged griffin. So what? Like *your* dates aren't weird?]

Anyway, when we got to the food court, Zia's jaw dropped. "Gods of Egypt…"

The restaurant choices were pretty overwhelming. Since we couldn't decide, we got a little of everything: Chinese, Mexican (the Macho Nachos), pizza, and ice cream—the four basic food groups. We grabbed a table overlooking the amusement park at the center of the mall.

A lot of other kids were hanging out in the food court. Many of them stared at us. Well…not at *me*. They were mostly looking at Zia and no doubt wondering what a girl like her was doing with a guy like me.

She'd healed up nicely since the battle. She wore a simple sleeveless dress of beige linen and black sandals—no makeup, no jewelry except for her gold scarab necklace. She looked way more glamorous and mature than the other girls in the mall.

Her long black hair was tied back in a ponytail, except for a little strand that curled behind her right ear. She'd always had luminous amber eyes and warm coffee-and-milk skin, but since hosting Ra, she seemed to glow even more. I could feel her warmth from across the table.

She smiled at me over her bowl of chow mein. "So, this is what typical American teenagers do?"

"Well…sort of," I said. "Though I don't think either of us will ever pass for *typical*."

"I hope not."

I had trouble thinking straight when I looked at her. If she'd asked me to jump over the railing, I probably would've done it.

Zia twirled her fork through her noodles. "Carter, we haven't talked much about…you know, my being the Eye of Ra. I can guess how strange that was for you."

See? Just your typical teenage conversation in the mall.

"Hey, I understand," I said. "It wasn't strange."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, it was strange," I admitted. "But Ra needed your help. You were amazing. Have you, uh, talked to him since…?"

She shook her head. "He's retreated from the world, just like he said. I doubt I'll be the Eye of Ra again—unless we face another Doomsday."

"So, with our luck, not for a few more weeks, you mean."

Zia laughed. I loved her laugh. I loved that little curl of hair behind her ear.

(Sadie says I'm being ridiculous. Like she's one to talk.)

"I had a meeting with your Uncle Amos," Zia said. "He has lots of help at the First Nome now. He thought it would be good for me to spend some time away, try to live a more…typical life."

My heart tripped and stumbled straight into my ribs. "You mean, like, leave Egypt?"

Zia nodded. "Your sister suggested I stay at Brooklyn House, attend American school. She says…how did she put it? *Americans are an odd bunch, but they grow on you.*"

Zia scooted around the table and took my hand. I sensed about twenty jealous guys glaring at me from the other tables of the food court.

"Would you mind if I stayed in Brooklyn House? I could help teach the initiates. But if that would make you uncomfortable—"

"No!" I said much too loudly. "I mean, no, I don't mind. Yes, I'd like that. A lot. Quite a bit. Totally fine."

Zia smiled. The temperature in the food court seemed to go up another ten degrees. "So that's a yes?"

"Yes. I mean, unless it would make *you* uncomfortable. I wouldn't want to make things awkward or—"

"Carter?" she said gently. "Shut up."

She leaned over and kissed me.

I did as she commanded, no magic necessary. I shut up.

SADIE

21. The Gods Are Sorted; My Feelings Are Not

AH, MY THREE FAVORITE WORDS: *Carter, shut up.*

Zia really has come a long way since we first met. I think there's hope for her, even if she does fancy my brother.

At any rate, Carter has wisely left the last bit of the story for me to tell.

After the battle with Apophis, I felt horrible on many levels. Physically, I was knackered. Magically, I'd used up every last bit of energy. I was afraid I might have permanently damaged myself, as I had a smoldering feeling behind my sternum that was either my exhausted magic reservoir or very bad heartburn.

Emotionally, I wasn't much better. I had watched Carter embrace Zia when she emerged from the steaming goo of the serpent, which was all very well, but it only reminded me of my own turmoil.

Where was Walt? (I'd decided to call him that, or I would drive myself crazy figuring out his identity.) He had been standing nearby just after the battle. Now he was gone.

Had he left with the other gods? I was already worried about Bes and Bast. It wasn't like them to disappear without saying good-bye. And I wasn't keen on what Ra had said about the gods leaving the earth for a while.

You cannot push me away without pushing away the gods, Apophis had warned.

The bloody serpent might have mentioned that *before* we execrated him. I had just made my peace with the whole Walt/Anubis idea—or *mostly*, at any rate—and now Walt had vanished. If he'd been declared off-limits again, I was going to crawl into a sarcophagus and never come out.

While Carter was with Zia in the infirmary, I wandered the corridors of the First Nome, but found no sign of Walt. I tried to contact him with the *shen* amulet. No answer. I even tried to contact Isis for advice, but the goddess had gone silent. I didn't like that.

So, yes, I was quite distracted in the Hall of Ages during Carter's little acceptance speech: *I'd like to thank all the little people for making me pharaoh, et cetera, et cetera.*

I was glad to visit the Underworld and be reunited with my mum and dad. At least *they* weren't off-limits. But I was quite disappointed not to find Walt there. Even if he wasn't allowed in the mortal world, shouldn't he be in the Hall of Judgment, taking over the duties of Anubis?

That's when my mother pulled me aside. (Not literally, of course. Being a ghost, she couldn't pull me anywhere.) We stood to the left of the dais where the dead musicians played lively music. JD Grissom and his wife, Anne, smiled at me. They seemed happy, and I was glad for that, but I still had trouble seeing them without feeling guilty.

My mum tugged at her necklace—a ghostly replica of my own *tyet* amulet. "Sadie…we've never gotten to talk much, you and I."

Bit of an understatement, since she died when I was six. I understood what she meant, though. Even after our reunion last spring, she and I had never really chatted. Visiting her in the Duat was rather hard, and ghosts don't have e-mail or Skype or mobile phones. Even if they had had a proper Internet connection, "friending" my dead mother on Facebook would have felt rather odd.

I didn't say any of that. I just nodded.

"You've grown strong, Sadie," Mum said. "You've had to be brave for so long, it must be hard for you to let your defenses down. You're afraid to lose any more people you care about."

I felt lightheaded, as if I were turning into a ghost, too. Had I become see-through, like my mother? I wanted to argue and protest and joke. I didn't want to hear my mother's commentary, especially when it was so accurate.

At the same time, I was so mixed up inside about Walt, so worried about what had happened to him, I wanted to break down and cry on my mother's shoulder. I wanted her to hug me and tell me it was all right. Unfortunately, one can't cry on the shoulder of a ghost.

"I know," Mum said sadly, as if reading my thoughts. "I wasn't there for you when you were small. And your father…well, he had to leave you with Gran and Gramps. They tried to provide you with a normal life, but you're so much *more* than normal, aren't you? And now here you are, a young woman.…" She sighed. "I've missed so much of your life, I don't know if you'll want my advice now. But for what it's worth: trust your feelings. I can't promise that you'll never get hurt again, but I can promise you the risk is worth it."

I studied her face, unchanged since the day she had died: her wispy blond hair, her blue eyes, the rather mischievous curve of her eyebrows. Many times, I'd been told that I looked like her. Now I could see it clearly. As I'd got older, it was quite striking how much our faces looked alike. Put some purple highlights in her hair, and Mum would've made an excellent Sadie stunt double.

"You're talking about Walt," I said at last. "This is a heart-to-heart chat about *boys*?"

Mum winced. "Yes, well…I'm afraid I'm rubbish at this. But I had to try. When I was a girl, Gran wasn't much of a resource for me. I never felt I could talk to her."

"I should think not." I tried to imagine talking about guys with my grandmother while Gramps yelled at the telly and called for more tea and burnt biscuits.

"I think," I ventured, "that mothers normally warn *against* following one's heart, getting involved with the wrong sort of boy, getting a bad reputation. That sort of thing."

"Ah." Mum nodded contritely. "Well, you see, I can't do that. I suppose I'm not worried about you doing the wrong thing, Sadie. I *am* worried that you might be afraid to trust someone—even the right someone. It's *your* heart, of course. Not mine. But I'd say Walt is more nervous than you are. Don't be too hard on him."

"Hard on *him*?" I almost laughed. "I don't even know where he is! And he's hosting a god who—who—"

"Whom you also like," Mum supplied. "And that's confusing, yes. But they are really one person, now. Anubis has so much in common with Walt. Neither has ever had a real life to look forward to. Now, together, they do."

"You mean…" The horrible burning sensation behind my sternum began to ease, ever so slightly.

"You mean I *will* see him again? He's not exiled, or whatever nonsense the gods are going on about?"

"You will see him," my mother affirmed. "Because they are one, inhabiting a single mortal body, they may walk the earth, as the Ancient Egyptian god-kings did. Walt and Anubis are both good young men. They are both nervous, and quite awkward in the mortal world, and scared about how people will treat them. And they both feel the same way about you."

I was probably blushing terribly. Carter stared at me from the top of the dais, no doubt wondering what was wrong. I didn't trust myself to meet his eyes. He was a bit too good at reading my expression.

"It's so bloody *hard*," I complained.

Mother laughed softly. "Yes, it is. But if it's any consolation…dealing with *any* man means dealing with multiple personalities."

I glanced up at my father, who was flickering back and forth between Dr. Julius Kane and Osiris, the Smurf-blue god of the Underworld.

"I take your point," I said. "But where *is* Anubis? I mean Walt. Ugh! There I go again."

"You will see him soon," Mum promised. "I wanted you to be prepared."

My mind said: *This is too confusing, too unfair. I can't handle a relationship like this.*

But my heart said: *Shut up! Yes, I can!*

"Thanks, Mum," I said, no doubt failing miserably to look calm and collected. "This business with the gods pulling away. Does that mean we won't see you and Dad as much?"

"Probably," she admitted. "But you know what to do. Keep teaching the path of the gods. Bring the House of Life back to its former glory. You and Carter and Amos will make Egyptian magic stronger than ever. And that's good…because your challenges are not over."

"Setne?" I guessed.

"Yes, him," Mum said. "But there are other challenges as well. I haven't completely lost the gift of prophecy, even in death. I see murky visions of other gods and rival magic."

That *really* didn't sound good.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What *other gods*?"

"I don't know, Sadie. But Egypt has always faced challenges from outside—magicians from elsewhere, even gods from elsewhere. Just be vigilant."

"Lovely," I muttered. "I preferred talking about boys."

Mother laughed. "Once you return to the mortal world, there will be one more portal. Look for it tonight. Some old friends of yours would like a word."

I had a feeling I knew whom she meant.

She touched a ghostly pendant around her neck—the *tyet* symbol of Isis.

"If you need me," Mum said, "use your necklace. It will call to me, just as the *shen* necklace calls to Walt."

"That would've been handy to know sooner."

"Our connection wasn't strong enough before. Now…I think it is." She kissed my forehead, though it felt like only a faint cool breeze. "I'm proud of you, Sadie. You have your whole life ahead of you. Make the most of it!"

That night at Brooklyn House, a swirling sand portal opened on the terrace, just as my mother had promised.

"That's for us," I said, getting up from the dinner table. "Come on, brother, dear."

On the other side of the portal, we found ourselves at the beach by the Lake of Fire. Bast was waiting, tossing a ball of yarn from hand to hand. Her pure black bodysuit matched her hair. Her feline eyes danced in the red light of the waves.

"They're waiting for you." She pointed up the steps to the House of Rest. "We'll talk when you come back down."

I didn't need to ask why she wasn't coming. I heard the melancholy in her voice. She and Tawaret had never got along because of Bes. Obviously, Bast wanted to give the hippo goddess some space. But also, I wondered if my old friend was starting to realize that she'd let a good man get away.

I kissed her on the cheek. Then Carter and I climbed the stairs.

Inside the nursing home, the atmosphere was festive. Fresh flowers decorated the nurses' station. Heket the frog goddess walked upside down along the ceiling, hanging party streamers, while a group of elderly dog-headed gods danced and sang the hokey-pokey—a very slow version, but still impressive. *You put your walker in / you put your IV out*—and so forth. The ancient lion-headed goddess Mekhit was slow-dancing with a tall male god. She purred loudly with her head on his shoulder.

"Carter, look," I said. "Is that—?"

"Onuris!" Tawaret answered, trotting over in her nurse's outfit. "Mekhit's husband! Isn't it wonderful? We were sure he'd faded ages ago, but when Bes called the old gods to war, Onuris came tottering out of a supply closet. Many others appeared too. They were finally needed, you see! The war gave them a reason to exist."

The hippo goddess crushed us in an enthusiastic hug. "Oh, my dears! Just look how happy everyone is! You've given them new life."

"I don't see as many as before," Carter noticed.

"Some went back to the heavens," Tawaret said. "Or off to their old temples and palaces. And, of course, your dear father, Osiris, took the judgment gods back to his throne room."

Seeing the old gods so happy warmed my heart, but I still felt a twinge of worry. "Will they stay this way? I mean, they won't fade again?"

Tawaret spread her stubby hands. "I suppose that depends on you mortals. If you remember them and make them feel important, they should be fine. But come, you'll want to see Bes!"

He sat in his usual chair, staring blankly out the window at the Lake of Fire. The scene was so familiar, I feared he'd lost his *ren* again.

"Is he all right?" I cried, running up to him. "What's wrong with him?"

Bes turned, looking startled. "Besides being ugly? Nothing, kid. I was just thinking—sorry."

He rose (as much as a dwarf can rise) and hugged us both.

"Glad you kids could make it," Bes said. "You know Tawaret and I are going to build a home on the lakeside. I've gotten used to this view. She'll keep working at the House of Rest. I'll be a house dwarf for a while. Who knows? Maybe I'll get some little dwarf hippo babies to look after!"

"Oh, Bes!" Tawaret blushed fiercely and batted her hippo eyelids.

The dwarf god chuckled. "Yeah, life is good. But if you kids need me, just holler. I've always had more luck coming to the mortal world than most gods."

Carter scowled fretfully. "Do you think we'll need you a lot? I mean, of course we want to see you! I just wondered—"

Bes grunted. "Hey, I'm an ugly dwarf. I've got a sweet car, an excellent wardrobe, and amazing powers. Why *wouldn't* you need me?"

"Good point," Carter agreed.

"But, uh, don't call *too* often," Bes said. "After all, my honeycakes and I got a few millennia of quality time to catch up on."

He took Tawaret's hand, and for once I didn't find the name of this place—Sunny Acres—quite so depressing.

"Thank you for everything, Bes," I said.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "You gave me my life back, and I don't just mean my shadow."

I got the distinct feeling the two gods wanted some time by themselves, so we said our goodbyes and headed down the steps to the lake.

The white sand portal was still swirling. Bast stood next to it, engrossed in her ball of yarn. She laced it between her fingers to make a rectangle like a cat's cradle. (No, I didn't mean that as a pun, but it *did* seem appropriate.)

"Having fun?" I asked.

"Thought you'd want to see this." She held up the cat's cradle. A video image flickered across its surface like on a computer screen.

I saw the Hall of the Gods with its soaring columns and polished floors, its braziers burning with a hundred multicolored fires. On the central dais, the sun boat had been replaced with a golden throne. Horus sat there in his human form—a bald muscular teen in full battle armor. He held a crook and flail across his lap, and his eyes gleamed—one silver, one gold. At his right stood Isis, smiling proudly, her rainbow wings shimmering. On his left stood Set, the red-skinned Chaos god with his iron staff. He looked quite amused, as if he had all sorts of wicked things planned for later. The other gods knelt as Horus addressed them. I scanned the crowd for Anubis—with or without Walt—but again, I didn't see him.

I couldn't hear the words, but I reckoned it was a similar speech to the one Carter had delivered to the House of Life.

"He's doing the same thing I did," Carter protested. "I bet he even stole my speech. That copycat!"

Bast clucked disapprovingly. "No need to call names, Carter. Cats are not copiers. We are all unique. But, yes, what you do as pharaoh in the mortal world will often be mirrored in the world of the gods. Horus and you, after all, rule the forces of Egypt."

"That," I said, "is a truly scary thought."

Carter swatted me lightly on the arm. "I just can't believe that Horus left without even a goodbye. It's as if he tossed me aside as soon as he was done using me, and then forgot about me."

"Oh, no," Bast said. "Gods wouldn't do that. He simply had to leave."

But I wondered. Gods were rather selfish creatures, even those who weren't cats. Isis hadn't given me a proper good-bye or thank-you either.

"Bast, you're coming with us, aren't you?" I pleaded. "I mean, this silly exile can't apply to you! We need our nap instructor at Brooklyn House."

Bast wadded up her ball of yarn and tossed it down the steps. Her expression was quite sad for a feline. "Oh, my kittens. If I could, I would pick you up by the scruffs of your necks and carry you forever. But you've grown. Your claws are sharp, your eyesight is keen, and cats must make their own way in the world. I must say farewell for now, though I'm sure we'll meet again."

I wanted to protest that I hadn't grown up and I didn't even have claws.

(Carter disagrees, but what does he know?)

But part of me knew Bast was right. We'd been lucky to have her with us for so long. Now we had to be adult cats—er, humans.

"Oh, Muffin…" I hugged her fiercely, and could feel her purring.

She ruffled my hair. Then she rubbed Carter's ears, which was quite funny.

"Go on, now," she said. "Before I start to mewl. Besides…" She fixed her eyes on the ball of yarn, which had rolled to the bottom of the steps. She crouched and tensed her shoulders. "I have some hunting to do."

"We'll miss you, Bast," I said, trying not to cry. "Good hunting."

"Yarn," she said absently, creeping down the steps. "Dangerous prey, yarn…"

Carter and I stepped through the portal. This time it deposited us onto the roof of Brooklyn House.

We had one more surprise. Standing by Freak's roost, Walt was waiting. He smiled when he saw me, and my legs felt wobbly.

"I'll, um, be inside," Carter said.

Walt walked over, and I tried to remember how to breathe.

SADIE

22. The Last Waltz (for Now)

HE'D CHANGED HIS LOOK AGAIN.

His amulets were gone except for one—the *shen* that matched mine. He wore a black muscle shirt, black jeans, a black leather duster, and black combat boots—a sort of mix of Anubis's and Walt's styles, but it made him look like someone entirely different and new. Yet his eyes were quite familiar—warm, dark brown, and lovely. When he smiled, my heart fluttered as it always had.

"So," I said, "is this another good-bye? I've had quite enough good-byes today."

"Actually," Walt said, "it's more of a hello. My name's Walt Stone, from Seattle. I'd like to join the party."

He held out his hand, still smiling slyly. He was repeating exactly what he'd said the first time we met, when he arrived at Brooklyn House last spring.

Instead of taking his hand, I punched him in the chest.

"Ow," he complained. But I doubt that I'd hurt him. He had quite a solid chest.

"You think you can just merge with a god and *surprise* me like that?" I demanded. "*Oh, by the way, I'm actually two minds in one body.* I don't appreciate being taken off guard."

"I did try to tell you," he said. "Several times. Anubis did too. We kept getting interrupted. Mostly by you talking a lot."

"No excuse." I folded my arms and scowled as best I could. "My mum seems to think I should go easy on you because this is all very new to you. But I'm still cross. It's confusing enough, you know, liking someone, without their morphing into a *god* whom I also like."

"So you do like me."

"Stop trying to distract me! Are you truly asking to stay here?"

Walt nodded. He was very close now. He smelled good, like vanilla candles. I tried to remember if that was Walt's scent or Anubis's. Honestly, I couldn't recall.

"I've still got a lot to learn," he said. "I don't need to stick with charm-making anymore. I can do more intensive magic—the path of Anubis. No one's ever done that before."

"Discovering new magical ways to annoy me?"

He tilted his head. "I could do amazing tricks with mummy linen. For instance, if someone talks too much, I could summon a gag—"

"Don't you dare!"

He took my hand. I gave him a defiant scowl, but I didn't take back my hand.

"I'm still Walt," he said. "I'm still mortal. Anubis can stay in this world as long as I'm his host. I'm hoping to live a good long life. Neither of us ever thought that was possible. So I'm not going anywhere, unless you want me to leave."

My eyes probably answered for me: *No, please. Not ever.* But I couldn't very well give him the satisfaction of my saying that out loud, could I? Boys can get so full of themselves.

"Well," I grumbled, "I suppose I could tolerate it."

"I owe you a dance." Walt put his other hand on my waist—a traditional pose, very old-fashioned, as Anubis had done when we waltzed at the Brooklyn Academy. My Gran would've approved.

"May I?" he asked.

"Here?" I said. "Won't your chaperone Shu interrupt?"

"Like I said, I'm mortal now. He'll let us dance, though I'm sure he's keeping an eye on us to make sure we behave."

"To make sure *you* behave," I snipped. "I'm a proper young lady."

Walt laughed. I supposed it was funny. *Proper* wasn't the first word normally used to describe me.

I pounded his chest again, though I'll admit not very hard. I put my hand on his shoulder.

"I'll have you remember," I warned, "that my father is your employer in the Underworld. You'd best mind your manners."

"Yes, ma'am," Walt said. He leaned down and kissed me. All my anger melted into my shoes.

We started to dance. There was no music, no ghostly dancers, no floating on air—nothing magic about it. Freak watched us curiously, no doubt wondering how this activity was going to produce turkeys to feed the griffin. The old tar roof creaked under our feet. I was still quite tired from our long battle, and I hadn't cleaned up properly. No doubt I looked horrid. I wanted to melt into Walt's arms, which is basically what I did.

"So you'll let me stick around?" he asked, his breath warm on my scalp. "Let me experience a typical teenage life?"

"I suppose." I looked up at him. It took no effort at all to slip my vision into the Duat and see Anubis there, just under the surface. But it really wasn't necessary. This was a new boy in front of me, and he was everything I liked. "Not that I'm an expert myself, but there is one rule I insist on."

"Yes?"

"If anyone asks you if you're taken," I said, "the answer is *yes*."

"I think I can live with that," he promised.

"Good," I said. "Because you don't want to see me be cross."

"Too late."

"Shut up and dance, Walt."

We did—with the music of a psychotic griffin screaming behind us, and the sirens and horns of Brooklyn wailing below. It was quite romantic.

So there you have it.

We've returned to Brooklyn House. The various catastrophes plaguing the world have lessened—at least somewhat—and we are dealing with an influx of new initiates as the school year gets properly under way.

It should be obvious now why this may be our last recording. We're going to be so busy training and attending school and living our lives, I doubt we'll have time or reason to send out any more audio pleas for help.

We'll put this tape in a secure box and send it along to the chap who's been transcribing our adventures. Carter seems to think the postal service will do, but I think I'll give it to Khufu to carry through the Duat. What could possibly go wrong?

As for us, don't think our lives will be all fun and games. Amos couldn't leave a mob of teens unsupervised, and as we don't have Bast anymore, Amos has sent a few adult magicians to Brooklyn House as teachers (read: chaperones). But we all know who's really in charge—*me*. Oh, yes, and perhaps Carter a little bit.

We're not done with trouble, either. I'm still worried about that murderous ghost Setne, who's on the loose in the world with his devious mind, horrible fashion sense, and the Book of Thoth. I'm also puzzling over my mother's comments about rival magic and other gods. No idea what that means, but it doesn't sound good.

In the meantime, there are still hotspots of evil magic and demon activity all over the world that we have to take care of. We've even got reports of unexplainable magic as close as Long Island. Probably have to check that out.

But for now, I plan on enjoying my life, annoying my brother as much as possible, and making Walt into a proper boyfriend while keeping the other girls away from him—most likely with a flamethrower. My work is never done.

As for you lot out there, listening to this recording—we're never too busy for new initiates. If you have the blood of the pharaohs, what are you waiting for? Don't let your magic go to waste. Brooklyn House is open for business.

GLOSSARY

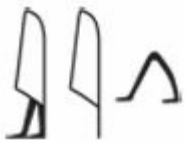
Egyptian Commands Used in *The Red Pyramid*

Ha-di "Destroy"

Ha-wi "Strike"

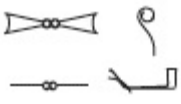
Hah-ri "Quiet"

Hi-nehm "Join"



I-ei "Come"

Sahad "Open"

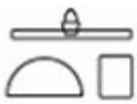


Tas "Bind"

Egyptian Commands Used in *The Throne of Fire*

A'max "Burn"

Ha-di "Destroy"

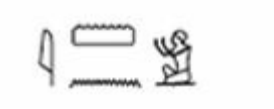


Ha-tep "Be at peace"

Heh-sieh “Turn back”

Heqat Summons a staff

Hi-nehm “Join”



L’mun “Hide”

N’dah “Protect”

Sa-per “Miss”

W’peh “Open”

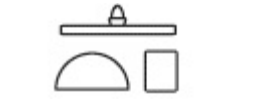
Egyptian Commands Used in *The Serpent’s Shadow*

Drowah “Boundary”

Fah “Release”

Ha-di “Destroy”

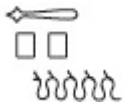
Hapi, u-ha ey pwah “Hapi, arise and attack”



Ha-tep “Be at peace”

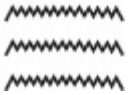
Ha-wi “Strike”

Hi-nehm “Join together”



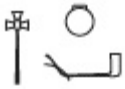
Isfet “Chaos”

Ma’at “Restore order”



Maw “Water”

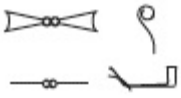
Med-wah “Speak”



N’dah “Protect”

Sa-hei “Bring down”

Se-kebeb “Make cold”



Tas “Bind”

Other Egyptian Terms

Aaru the Egyptian afterlife, paradise

Ankh a hieroglyphic symbol for life

Aten the sun (the physical object, not the god)

Ba soul

Barque the pharaoh's boat

Bau an evil spirit

Bennu phoenix

Canopic jar vessel used to store mummy's organs

Cartouche a drawing of an oblong magical rope that contains and protects the hieroglyphs that spell out the name of a king or queen

Criosphinx a creature with a body of a lion and head of a ram

Djed a hieroglyphic symbol that stands for stability, strength, and the power of Osiris

Duat magical realm

Hieroglyphics the writing system of Ancient Egypt, which used symbols or pictures to denote objects, concepts, or sounds

Isfet chaos

Ka one of the five parts of the soul: the life force

Khopesh a sword with a hook-shaped blade

Ma'at order of the universe

Menhed the scribe's palette

***Netjeri* blade** a knife made from meteoric iron for the opening of the mouth in a ceremony

Nome district, region

Per Ankh the House of Life

Pharaoh a ruler of Ancient Egypt

Rekhet healer

Ren name, identity

Sahlab a warm Egyptian drink

Sarcophagus a stone coffin, often decorated with sculpture and inscriptions

Sau a charm maker

Scarab beetle

Shabti a magical figurine made out of clay

Shen eternal, eternity

Shesh scribe, writer, or magician

Sheut one of the five parts of the soul: the shadow; can also mean statue

Sistrum bronze noisemaker

Souk open air market

Stele limestone grave marker

Tjesu heru a snake with two heads—one on its tail—and dragon legs

Tyet a magic knot and the symbol of Isis

Was power; staff

EGYPTIAN GODS AND GODDESSES

Anubis the god of funerals and death
Apophis the god of chaos
Babi the baboon god
Bast the cat goddess
Bes the dwarf god
Disturber a god of judgment who works for Osiris
Geb the earth god
Gengen-Wer the goose god
Hapi the god of the Nile
Heket the frog goddess
Horus the war god, son of Isis and Osiris
Isis the goddess of magic, wife of her brother Osiris and mother of Horus
Khepri the scarab god, Ra's aspect in the morning
Khnum the ram-headed god, Ra's aspect at sunset in the underworld
Khonsu the moon god
Mekhit minor lion goddess, married to Onuris
Neith the hunting goddess
Nekhbet the vulture goddess
Nephthys the river goddess
Nut the sky goddess
Osiris the god of the underworld, husband of his sister Isis and father of Horus
Ptah the god of craftsmen
Ra the sun god, the god of order. Also known as Amun-Ra.
Sekhmet the lion goddess
Serqet the scorpion goddess
Set the god of evil
Shezmu demonic god of blood and wine
Shu the air god, great-grandfather of Anubis
Sobek the crocodile god
Tawaret the hippo goddess
Thoth the god of knowledge